

Rugby League Week

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EVERY SIDE'S RECRUITS RATED

**The
players
who'll set
the Nines
on fire**

**ENOUGH IS
ENOUGH!**
League legends
slam pre-season
meat market

**FROM THE
MINES
TO FIRST
GRADE**
Newcastle
Knight's hard
slog pays off

Blood, sweat & no fears

How
**Scott,
Johnson
& Slater**
are coming
back from
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'Treated like pieces of meat!'

Big names blow up over crazy silly-season cattle trading

BY TONY ADAMS & TOM SMITH



Contracted players who've swapped clubs since the grand final

Matt Ballin Wests Tigers from Sea Eagles, was contracted for 2016-17

David Bhana Knights from Warriors, 2016

Sam Burgess Rabbitohs from Bath rugby union, 2016-17

Adam Clydsdale Raiders from Knights, 2016

Jordan Drew Sharks from Broncos, 2016

Tim Grant Wests Tigers from Rabbitohs, 2016-18

Clint Gutherson Eels from Sea Eagles, 2016-17

Jeremy Hawkins Storm from Raiders, 2016-17

Peta Hiku Panthers from Sea Eagles, 2016-17

Will Hopoate Bulldogs from Eels, 2016-18

Tim Lafai Dragons from Bulldogs, 2016-17

Jeff Lima Raiders from Catalans, 2016

Josh McCrone Dragons from Raiders, 2016

Chris McQueen Titans from Rabbitohs, 2016

Joseph Paulo Sharks from Eels, 2016

James Roberts Broncos from Titans, 2016-18

Jesse Sene-Lefao Sharks from Sea Eagles, 2016

Kelepi Tanginoo Eels from Cowboys, 2016

Martin Taupau Sea Eagles from Wests Tigers, 2016

Dylan Walker (pictured, main) Sea Eagles from Rabbitohs, 2016

Matt White Storm from Titans, 2016

Correct at time of print

LEAGUE LEGENDS AND fans are up in arms over the game's latest ugly trend – players being traded like cattle over the off-season.

The game has sunk to a new low in transfer moves, with a whopping 21 players contracted for 2016 swapping clubs since the grand final – including Souths' huge cleanout to squeeze in Sam Burgess, Will Hopoate's shift to Canterbury after a Supreme Court wrangle with Parramatta, and the chain of centres falling like dominos with Brisbane's Dale Copley next to go.

The summer meat market has confused fans and will only get worse in coming seasons as ruthless clubs chop and change their rosters under the salary cap right until the new season begins.

"I feel for the supporters – they are the ones feeling the brunt of this rampant and unprecedented exchange of players so late in the year," Panthers great Mark Geyer says. "Confusion reigns in footy land and yes, it's unfair to the fans asking them to commit year in, year out when the players they loved don't."

Many clubs have forced players out by pressuring them to move on or spend the rest of the year languishing in reserve grade.

"That's not fair on the players and this is where the Players Association needs to be stronger," says 1983 Rothmans Medallist and lawyer Mike Eden.

"They're showing no

leadership – players sign legally binding contracts and are being pushed out despite that.

"Players are being treated like pieces of meat."

RLPA president Clint Newton refused to confirm to *RLW* if any of his constituents have complained about the off-season cattle trade, but concedes that shooing contracted players out the door so late in the pre-season is a concern.

"We're certainly keeping a very close eye on it. The players should never, ever – and I'll make that very clear – never, ever be punished for a poorly managed roster," Newton says. "If a player ever feels pressured or intimidated by a club, that's certainly an incredibly concerning issue and that's where the player's agent and the RLPA would take that up with the club."

Newton says, however, that the association is happy with contracted players trading clubs deep in pre-season so long as the player is happy, too.

"People change jobs in the general public, and players are no different," he says.

"We're certainly comfortable with players moving if all parties agree and the player doesn't lose out."

Ex-Maroons forward and media personality Darryl Brohman is filthy with the new trend.

"As a fan of the game, I hate it," Brohman fires. "As a commentator I understand it's now part of the game given we have a salary cap.

"It will continue as long as there's a salary cap." **RLW**



COPLEY



ROBERTS



HOPOATE



HIKU



LAFAI



MCQUEEN

The players who'll set the Nines on fire

Come February 6, all eyes will be on Auckland. Here's the player from your club who could bust the high-octane form of the game wide open

BY SHAYNE BUGDEN AND TOM SMITH



AIR STRIKE!
The Warriors score four courtesy of Solomone Kata.

POOL HUNUA



Broncos

A winger/fullback described as a "pure athlete" by former Brissie flyer Chris Walker, **Carlin Anderson** has the pace, footwork and can't-be-taught scoring ability that's ideal for the Nines. The 20-year-old was a standout for Ipswich as they took out the Intrust Super Cup last year, and Jets co-coach Shane Walker told RLW he "has the talent to be enormous for Brisbane". He can start to prove that in Auckland.

Bulldogs

Only one player scored more NRL tries than **Curtis Rona** in 2015. He's so good the Maroons must be spewing that the former Queensland Residents rep isn't eligible for Origin. Rona scored a few highlight-reel four-pointers for the Cowboys when they won the 2014 Nines. He has great speed, hands that

seem to be made of glue, and a knack for touching down in impossibly tight spaces in the corner.



Sea Eagles

Backs who can outrun a greyhound love the Nines, but so do players who can suck in a few defenders and offload to a teammate who suddenly has stacks of room to run. **Feleti Mateo** has spent years making

an art form of promoting the footy with blokes hanging off him, and Manly will be clinically insane if they don't have a player or two trailing him to the line on every hit-up.

Warriors

When Shaun Johnson smashed his ankle last July, **Tuimoala Lolohea** stepped in. And while the Warriors didn't win a game with him at half, he played well enough to get a call-up for the Kiwis' tour of England. His pace and ball skills have seen him play from the halves right through to fullback in the NRL, he never says die in cover defence and he can set up tries and score them in equal measure.

POOL WAIHEKE



Eels

The surname 'Folau' belongs on the big stage and monstrous Eel **John Folau** will be craving the Eden Park limelight after his anonymous end to 2015. 'Mini Izzy' went missing with a broken leg after exploding onto the NRL scene with two tries in Parra's upset win against Souths in round four . . . but ignore this wrecking ball at your peril. The 193cm, 112kg 21-year-old will have rival outside backs looking forward to the Nines about as much as a visit to the dentist for a root canal.

Rabbitohs

Adam Reynolds was last year's player of the tournament but this time Rabbitohs fans will have their eyes glued to **Kirisome Auva'a**, and not just because his importance to their backline has skyrocketed with the loss of Dylan Walker. He's proved himself a deadly finisher, scoring almost every other week in 2014, and he can get around the defence or bull his way through it to pop balls for other backs to latch onto.



JILLAROOS VS KIWI FERNS: GAMES YOU CAN'T MISS

Anyone who thought women's footy was slow, unskilled and softer than a doona full of marshmallows was in for a rude shock when the Aussie and NZ ladies went berserk in their three Nines games last year. Some of the hits the Kiwi Ferns put on would've stopped a bulldozer!

Jillaroos captain and prop forward Steph Hancock (*below*) has admitted the Aussies were blindsided after going into the tournament thinking "it was a bit more like touch footy". Devastating tackles from Rona Peters soon put paid to that.

She says this time around the green and gold girls are keen to "show our skill a little bit better than we did last year". Make sure you tune in, because the games are guaranteed to be just as fiery as the men's matches.



Roosters

He's a freckly, baby-faced, 21-year-old Pommy called 'Budgie' – but you'd better take Roosters recruit **Joe Burgess** seriously. The 193cm

winger bagged 52 tries in 58 games for Wigan, and while some players will be going through the motions in Auckland, Burgess will be hell for leather auditioning for a spot in the Chooks' 17 for the World Club Series back home in England.

Storm

Google '**Tony Tumusa**' and the top result is a YouTube video called 'Speed Demon' ... and that title is no beat-up. With scorching pace, a lunging sidestep and a shock of eye-catching bleached blond hair, the 20-year-old Junior Kiwi was born for the high-octane Nines. The rugby league world won't forget Tumusa's name after the stocky Storm winger thrills his fellow Aucklanders next month.

POOL RANGITOTO



Cowboys

Barnstorming back-rower **Coen Hess** made his NRL debut in Auckland last August, steaming onto a Johnathan Thurston short ball to crash over for a try in the Cowboys' thumping victory – and Hess' devastating running game will be a huge weapon again in Auckland next month. Still eight months off his 20th birthday and already 190cm and 112kg, this hulking kid from Mt Isa is primed to rock the Shaky Isles at the Nines.



Knights

Peter Mulholland, the recruiting whiz who brought **Danny Levi** to Newcastle in 2013, last year described the rake as "an old-fashioned hooker who was 10 metres ahead of everybody else in his thinking" ... and the Nines rewards players who are as quick between the ears as they are across the turf.

Bonus points to the Wellington-born 20-year-old for the tribal tattoo on his right arm that kind of looks like the Nines trophy.



Panthers

He hasn't got Tommy Lee Jones by his side but **Will Smith** is certain to light up Eden Park with his out-of-this-world talents alongside his very own cast of Men in Black. The Panther with the Hollywood name has filled in at half and fullback during Penrith's injury crises of the last two years, and the

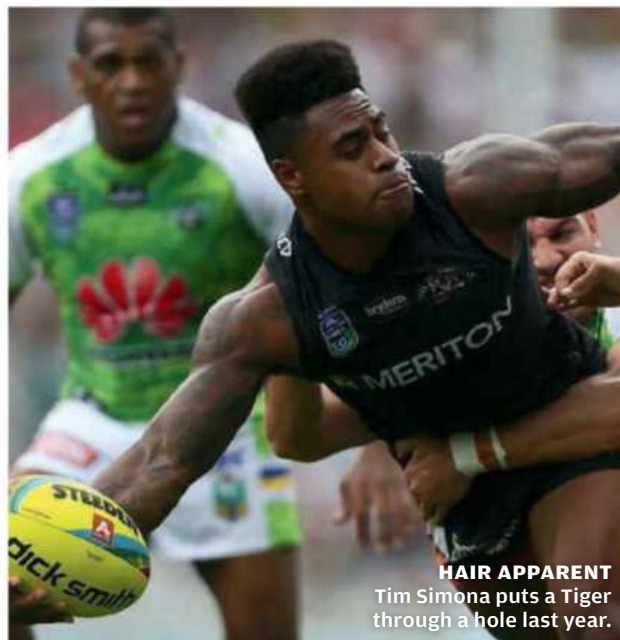
zippy 23-year-old's versatility, speed and incredible toughness for a little man will contribute plenty to the Nines highlights.



Tigers

Jesse Parahi stands 190cm, weighs more than 100kg and has good speed over the first 10 metres for his size, but that's not why we're tipping him to rip it up in NZ. The newly minted Tiger represented Australia 33 times in rugby union sevens, demonstrating aggro in defence, good

footwork and the ability to get the ball off in heavy traffic. He's no league novice, either, having played until his teens.



HAIR APPARENT
Tim Simona puts a Tiger through a hole last year.



GET OFF ME!
Tyson Frizell rips in for the Dragons in 2015.

POOL PIHA

Dragons

Taane Milne was a dual-code representative at junior level and the fleet-footed centre will thrive in the open spaces the Nines provides. The 20-year-old Clovelly junior was part of the Roosters' squad which made it to the semi-finals of last year's Nines, so he knows the drill. Boasting a strong running game, blistering speed and skilful play, Milne adds another dimension to a Dragons backline which at times during 2015 was criticised for being too slow. An NRL call-up beckons if he can nail the Nines.



Raiders

One of the first things Ricky Stuart did when he got to Canberra in late 2013 was lock up Newcastle teenager **Tevita Pangai Jnr** to a three-year deal – and the Nines gives Pangai the perfect platform to showcase the skills that Sticky's such a fan of. At 190cm and 118kg, there's nothing junior about this bloke, a devastating ball-runner in the Jason Taumalolo mould who'll be in line for an NRL debut in 2016 if he impresses at the Auckland tournament.



Sharks

You wouldn't expect a 29-year-old front-rower to light up the thrill-a-minute Nines but **Sam Tagataese** is tailor-made for the short form of the game. The veteran Cronulla prop whacks hard in defence and boasts a clean pair of heels for a big bopper – and the Kiwi's combination of speed and size is what will make him such a potent weapon for the Sharkies. After all, how many front-rowers can say they've made seven NRL appearances in the centres?



Titans

Broken play, back-peddalling defences, exhausted opponents ... the Nines is a dummy-half's wildest fantasy, and a dream come true for dynamic Titans hooker **Kierran Moseley**. The 21-year-old livewire mightn't be the strongest tackler or have the biggest motor but at February's Eden Park try-a-thon, who gives a stuff! Moseley's silky-smooth skills with Steeden in hand are what will bring the punters to their feet and have Pool Piha rivals sweating bullets.

THE MOLE

Follow The Mole: [@RLW_Mole](https://twitter.com/RLW_Mole) / email: themole@bauer-media.com.au

Panthers keen on Reynolds, Cronk to Redfern

THE GREAT HALFBACK SHUFFLE IS set to continue over coming months, with the Panthers considering a move for Rabbitohs ace Adam Reynolds for 2017.

And if Reynolds goes, Souths have the ideal replacement in mind: Storm, Queensland and Kangaroos halfback Cooper Cronk.

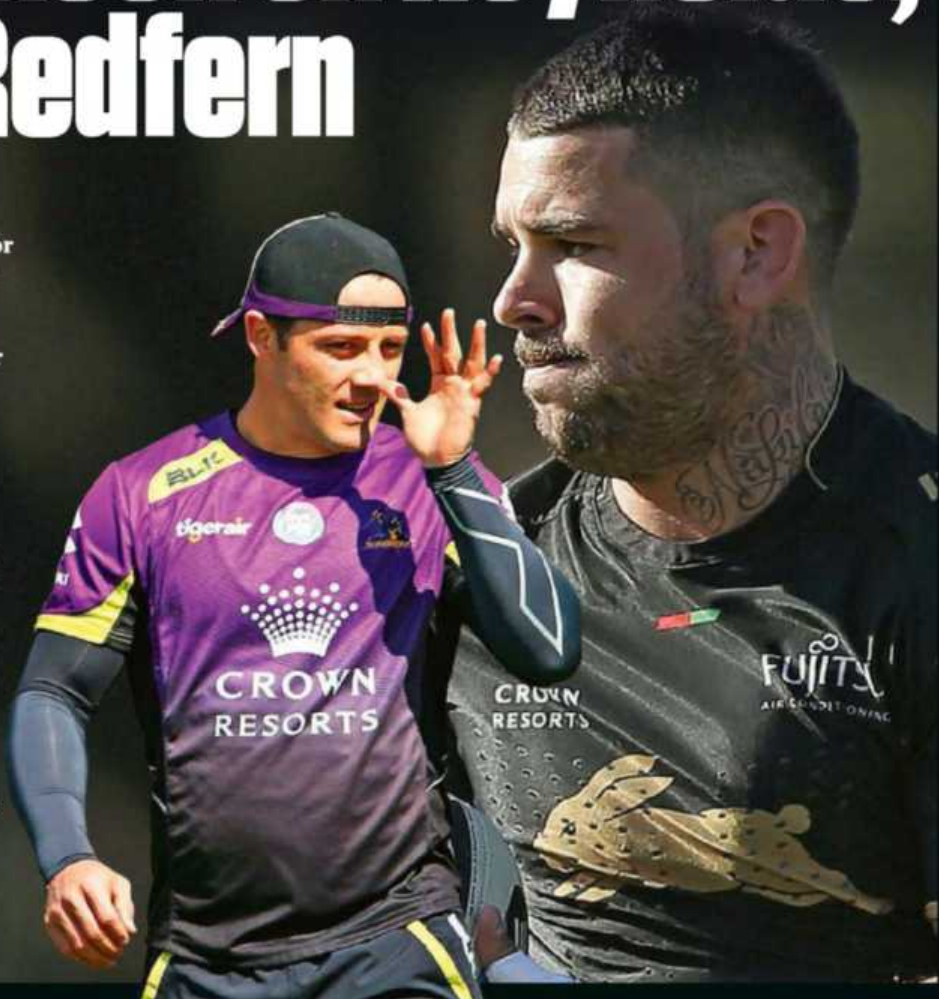
Cronk is weighing up moving to Sydney next year to be closer to his girlfriend, TV personality Tara Rushton, and has already been sounded out by several harbour city clubs.

Cronk has close ties with Rabbitohs coach Michael Maguire – the pair worked together at Melbourne between 2004-09 – and that gives Souths a handy edge.

The Dragons have been linked to Cronk, who'd be a perfect replacement for the off-contract Benji Marshall, but my mail is the Red V aren't really in the hunt.

Penrith are in the market for a top half, with their current playmakers Peter Wallace and Jamie Soward in the twilight of their careers.

Panthers boss Phil Gould is prepared to throw big dollars at a quality No.7, and Reynolds certainly fits the bill.



TITANS ALL CASHED-UP & NOWHERE TO GO

The Titans still have \$800,000 to spend under their salary cap with the NRL season kick-off only two months away, but the Gold Coast continues to struggle to attract big-name recruits. Player managers tell The Mole that their clients just aren't convinced the club is a realistic chance of reaching the finals in the short to medium term. Coach **Neil Henry** is keen to spend the cash on strike power in the centres and a powerhouse prop.

SOUTHS CHASING FORMER EELS FLANKER

The Rabbitohs are on the lookout for an outside back after narrowly missing out on luring ex-Titans tryscoring ace **James Roberts** back to Redfern. I hear they're eyeing **Ken Sio**, the former Parramatta flanker now playing for Hull KR in England. Sio had a fair strike rate in his four seasons in the NRL from 2011 to 2014, bagging 37 tries in 57 starts, and he's a good finisher who could add some potency to the Bunnies' backline in 2016.

SEX SHOCKER DOESN'T DETER LEEDS

Fans were quick to accuse Leeds CEO **Gary Hetherington** of double standards after he recruited love-rat England forward **Brett Ferres**. A year ago Hetherington tried to block Catalans' capture of **Todd Carney**, claiming the 'Bubbler' scandal would tarnish Super League's reputation. Previously he petitioned to stop **Greg Bird** moving to the competition. But Hetherington didn't hesitate before snapping up Ferres, even though he was transfer-listed by Huddersfield for sleeping with a team-mate's wife! Both the Roosters and Warriors showed interest in the Pommy Test star, but he didn't want to leave his three small children for a long season Down Under. "It's been an up-and-down year," Ferres said. Maybe not the best phrase to describe the episode, mate.

LANGER & WALTERS HELP HUNT GET OVER GF DISASTER

Broncos half **Ben Hunt** was able to put his grand final disappointments into perspective on the plane home to Brisbane last October. Whoever arranged the seating pulled a masterstroke by putting Hunt next to larrikin assistant coaches **Allan Langer** and **Kevin Walters**, who both made light of the No.7's killer dropped ball in extra time. When Hunt ordered a drink the pair would quip, "Don't drop it!" The 25-year-old was reportedly able to have a laugh and take it all in his stride.



SHARKS WIN FIVE-CLUB RACE TO SNARE BOOM KIWI FORWARD

The Sharks have picked up a barnstorming young Kiwi forward in **Kalani Pewhairangi-Charlie**. The 17-year-old was in hot demand, with the Panthers, Dragons, Bulldogs and Titans all beating a path to his door. But Pewhairangi-Charlie chose to join a good mate from the New Zealand Maori Under-17s team, **Jackson Ferris**, at Cronulla. The promising big man led the Akarana Under-17s to back-to-back NZ National Championships over the past two seasons and is seen as an outstanding talent.



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Jonah Lomu's time in league revealed in full

Legend's brother details late winger's years in our sport for the first time **BY STEVE DEANE**

LATE RUGBY UNION superstar Jonah Lomu's brother has given *RLW* the first detailed account of the All Blacks giant's close ties with rugby league.

The legendary winger, who tragically passed away suddenly last November aged just 40, didn't play his first game of union until he attended college at the age of 13.

The majority of his youthful footy efforts

were spent in rugby league as a rangy lock with the Manukau Magpies, playing alongside brother John in an offshoot of the club called Manukau Favona.

"We played league from our primary school days through to intermediate," John Lomu tells *RLW*. The pair combined in the Favona team that contested Auckland's Under-11s open grade in 1985 (pictured left).

Once best known for hosting one of New Zealand's largest trailer parks, Favona is one of Auckland's more deprived areas.

"A lot of the kids couldn't travel all the way over to the Magpies' home ground for training, so we ran out training sessions out of Favona Primary," John says.

The team was awarded the Ray Alderton Cup for the competition's best-presented team, quite an achievement for a side from Favona. The reward was the chance to meet some of their boyhood heroes.

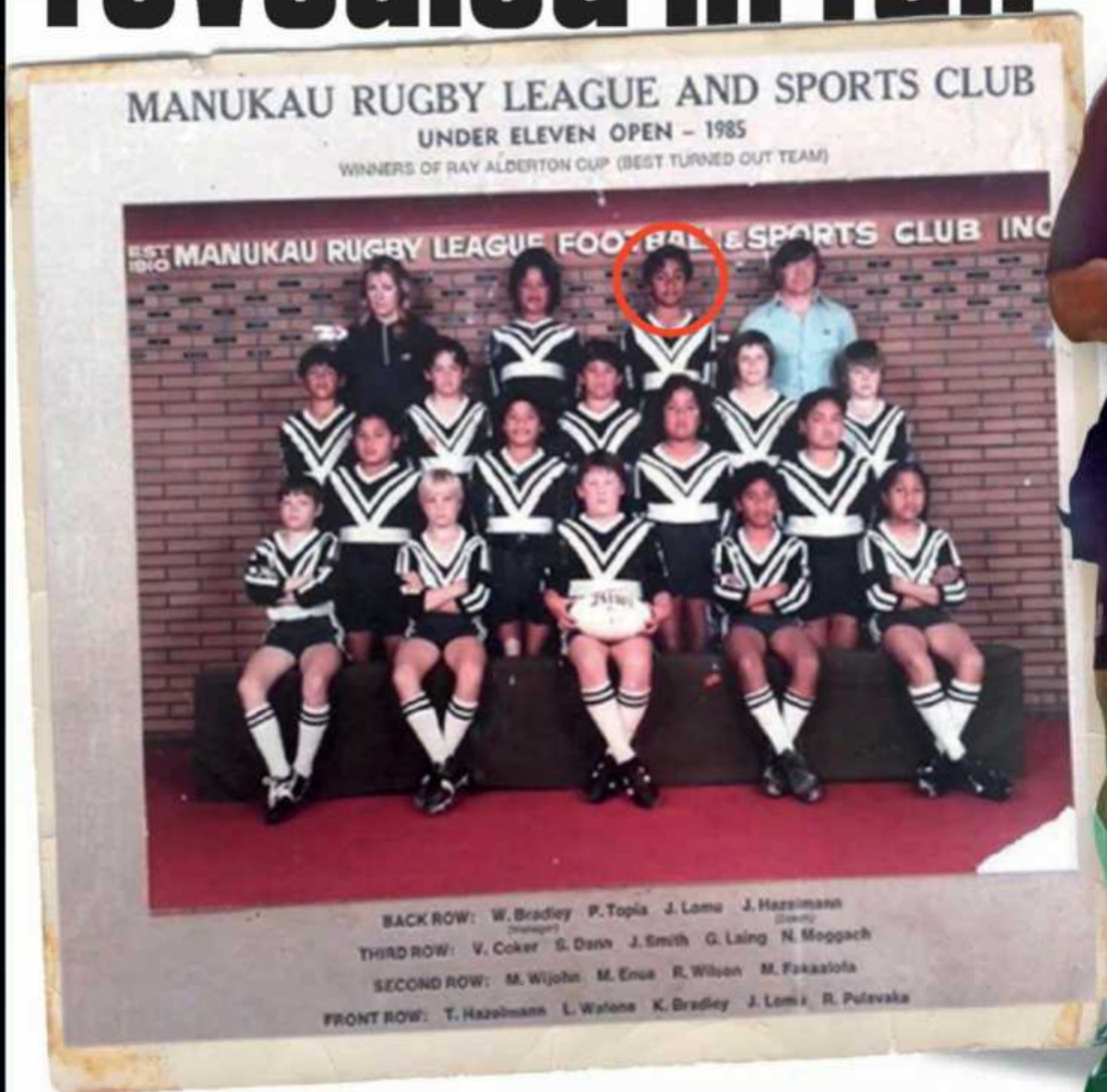
"We had the likes of Clayton Friend and Howie Tamati come out and present us with our prizes. They were the guys we looked up to, the Olsen Filipinas, the Dean Bells," John recalls.

He says Jonah seriously considered switching back to league after the 1995 Rugby World Cup, when the offers on the table included a then-whopping £1 million from upstart English minnows Sheffield Eagles.

"There was a temptation to look back at it but he made so many good friends in his early days in rugby that it sort of took over," John reckons.

"The consideration was there but there were a number of guys who were quite influential in him staying [in rugby]. Rushy [former All Black Eric Rush] was one of them, they became really good friends. He was one of the guys he looked up to who sort of nursed him through." **RLW**

"There was a temptation to look back at it but he made so many good friends in his early days in rugby that it sort of took over"



Rugby League Week

EDITOR Shayne Bugden (SBUGDEN@bauer-media.com.au) **EDITOR-IN-CHIEF MEN'S LIFESTYLE SPORT** Martin Lenehan **ART DIRECTOR** Joe Ferrara **CHIEF SUB-EDITOR** Phil Mitchell

STAFF WRITERS Tony Adams, Steven Russo **CONTRIBUTORS** Joel Gould, Greg Prichard, Tom Smith, Phil Wilkinson, Matt Cleary, Robert Burgin

PHOTO EDITOR Darren Dawkins **PHOTOGRAPHY** Getty Images, SMP Images, Photosport, SWpix.com, Newspix **PRODUCTION CONTROLLER** Ian Henn **ADVERTISING PRODUCTION** Sally Jefferys

NATIONAL SALES MANAGER SPORT Ben Wurzer (02) 9288 9608 **CIRCULATION MANAGER** Thomas Dang **RESEARCH DIRECTOR** Justin Stone **BRAND MANAGER** Georgia Mavrakakis

DESIGN DIRECTOR MEN'S LIFESTYLE SPORT Joe Ferrara **DIGITAL PRODUCER** Rocco Luca **DIGITAL EDITOR** John Dean

PUBLISHER - MOTORING & SPORTS Ewen Page **PUBLISHER** Cornelia Schulze **GROUP COMMERCIAL MANAGER - SPECIALIST DIVISION** Christy Trollip



RUGBY LEAGUE WEEK GPO Box 4088, Sydney, NSW 2001 Level 5, 54 Park Street, 66-68, Sydney. Telephone: (02) 9282 8000. Email: rlw@bauer-media.com.au *Rugby League Week* is published by Bauer Media Ltd ABN 18 053 273 546, ISSN 2205-0043, 54-58 Park St, Sydney, NSW, 2000, part of the Bauer Media Group. The trade mark Rugby League Week is the property of Bauer Consumer Media Ltd and is used under licence. Copyright 2015 All rights reserved. Printed by PMP Print, 31-35 Heathcote Rd, Moorebank, NSW 2170 (02) 9828 1350. *Recommended and maximum price only. Distributed by Network Services, 54 Park St, Sydney. All material contained in RLW is protected under the Commonwealth Copyright ACT 1968. No material may be reproduced in part or in whole without written consent from the copyright holders. The publisher accepts no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts, illustrations or photographic material.

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Gavet owes Bennett big-time

Super coach throws wayward prop on the scrap heap – then helps him climb off it **BY TONY ADAMS**

WAYNE BENNETT KNOWS James Gavet carries more baggage than an Airbus A380. But he also knows talent when sees it.

So much so the super coach has helped the wayward forward gain a lifeline at another NRL club.

Bennett cut Gavet from the Broncos' roster in October – but was willing to recommend the hard-running prop when quizzed by the Warriors about signing him.

As a result, the Warriors have placed Gavet on a strict 12-week trial agreement leading into the new season.

If the 26-year-old performs and fulfils his obligations off the field, he'll earn a full-time contract and join the NRL squad.

While Bennett urged the Warriors to sign Gavet, who has admitted to battling alcoholism throughout his career, he did warn the club about him.

"He told us that the guy has ability and could prove useful," a Warriors insider tells *RLW*.

"But he also said he was unreliable off the field and often late to training

and these are issues he has to deal with. But so far, his attitude has been great and we can't fault his application."

The Warriors have been desperate for an impact forward throughout the off-season to round off their squad – and wrecking-ball Gavet may just be the answer to their prayers.

They missed out on English international Brett Ferres and Roosters hardman Sam Moa despite lengthy negotiations, and were resigned to going into the 2016 campaign one front-rower short.

But if Gavet stays on track, he'll be a valuable addition to the Warriors' ranks.

The former Wests Tigers and Bulldogs enforcer played only one NRL game for the Broncos last year, in round one, before suffering a season-ending knee injury.

He was contracted to Brisbane for 2016 but Bennett sent him packing at the start of the off-season, leaving his career in limbo.

Without a club, Gavet returned home to New Zealand, where he has a small child and family support. **RLW**



DRAGONS ASK: WILL YOU BE OUR VALENTINE?



THEY MISSED OUT ON SIGNING

Cronulla star Jack Bird – but now the Dragons are poised to try to snare another potential superstar from their arch-rivals.

RLW can reveal the Dragons are set to make a huge offer for Sharks glamour boy Valentine Holmes.

Holmes is under contract until the end of 2017, but in this new age of player poaching, that doesn't mean a lot. The 20-year-old flyer has his heart set on playing fullback at Cronulla in 2016 but faces some stiff competition, and if he doesn't get the No.1 jumper he may be tempted by a move to the Big Red V.

"They've made inquiries about when Val is off contract," Holmes' manager Gavin Orr confirms. "They're playing Josh Dugan at centre, apparently, and are looking for a top-flight fullback, and Val certainly fits into that category."

Holmes is locked in a three-way battle with Dally M Rookie of the Year Jack Bird and 2012 Dally M Medallist Ben Barba for the fullback spot at Cronulla this season following veteran Michael Gordon's move to Parramatta.

"Val's really keen on the spot because he feels it will further his career," Orr says.

"He'll get more ball and more opportunities there than on the wing.

"But Benny is also a fine fullback and Bird needs a new spot after they signed Chad Townsend and James Maloney in the halves. It's a tough decision for Shane Flanagan."

The Sharks coach is keeping his options open, using all three players at fullback during pre-season training. He's likely to give all three a shot at the coveted spot in the trials and decide after that.

– TONY ADAMS

The quickest comeback since John Farnham

Only six months after snapping his Achilles, Josh McGuire is fully fit and desperate for a hit-up **BY JOEL GOULD**

WHEN JOSH MCGUIRE was after advice on overcoming the torn Achilles tendon that wiped out the second half of his 2015 season, he didn't have to look far. He's been picking the brain of team-mate Darius Boyd, who just last year came back from the same injury to play Origin and a grand final.

"Me and 'Darbs' still have conversations about what we've changed in our training program and the things that we do and don't do," McGuire says.

"The injury is at the back of your mind and you want to make sure you don't go through it again. That's why it's so handy having someone alongside you who's been through it."

Despite cruelling himself on June 26, the 25-year-old prop could be seen giving his all on the training bike outside the club's gym as his team-mates prepared for last year's finals series. He floated his determination to be right for the grand final just three months after his injury, even though it was realistically never going to happen.

But the psychological and motivational benefits of talking up his chances can't be underestimated.

In early December, just five and a half months after he busted the tendon, McGuire told *RLW* that he's ready to rock.

"The first thing I did was get on Google and search for athletes with Achilles injuries," he reveals.

"I just wanted to see how they came back and whether they ever got back to the same level they were at before."

"I read up on David Beckham, Kobe Bryant and Terrell Suggs, the linebacker for the Baltimore Ravens."

"Suggs came back five months after surgery and won a Super Bowl."

"It was performances like that which kept me motivated to not just get back, but to get back and be fit and fast and playing better. Now I'm doing weights, skills and the same training as the boys. If we had a game on Friday night, I'd be playing."

McGuire and wife Tanyssa have 20-month-old daughter Maiya and a boy due in March. There's more than a little symmetry about the impending arrival of his new son.

"The week we found out we were pregnant is the week I tore my Achilles and the week I play my first game is the week I have my baby," McGuire says.

"All things happen for a reason. I'm a big believer in that."

"I've played a lot of NRL at a young age, so the injury has been an opportunity to have six months away from the game, to get hungry and re-evaluate what I want to do."

"My goal is to come back and have a big year."

For his Christmas break the Origin prop got away to his wife's home town of Yeppoon in Central Queensland, to indulge his passions of hunting and barramundi fishing.

The holiday's over and there's work to be done if he's to be known as a great Broncos prop like the two front-rowers who led the club to their last premiership win in 2006.

"I don't think you're going to see another Shane Webcke or Petero Civoniceva," he reckons. "But I want to get a lot better. I want to play a lot more Origins and win premierships."

"It was a dream come true to play with Petero, a true gentleman and in my opinion the No.1 front-rower to have played our game. I learned a lot from him on the field, and off the field with regards to being a man and the importance of family."

"I want to be the best I can be and talked about as a tough player who always had a go and was a pleasure to play with. I'd be happy to walk away with those compliments." **RLW**

"If we had a game on Friday night, I'd be playing"

2016 PRE-SEASON REPORT CARD



BRISBANE BRONCOS

HOW'D THEY RECRUIT?

Apart from Souths getting Slammin' Sam back, the other signature everyone wanted was that of James Roberts. The Broncos won the race and it's a coup that will pay handsome dividends as the speed demon makes a quality backline even more lethal.

The bloke you can't afford to lose



When **Anthony Milford** joined the Broncos in 2015 it was hoped he'd be a quick learner and form a lethal halves partnership with Ben Hunt. He delivered on that score, and then some. So much so that the 21-year-old excitement machine was without doubt the best player in one of the greatest grand finals ever seen, even though Cowboys champion Johnathan Thurston won the Clive Churchill Medal. Milford can create something out of nothing, and the razzle dazzle genius that was the hallmark of Broncos sides in the 1990s. Without him the Broncos won't be the intimidating outfit they've founded so much of their success upon.

The make-or-break stretch of Brisbane's 2016 season

The Broncos have a tough month leading into the crucial Origin period when they take on Souths (home), the Sharks (away), Sea Eagles (home) and Cowboys (away) from rounds eight to 11. All four sides are expected make the top eight. The Broncos have based much of their previous success on accumulating points before the rep season sees them lose many stars to Origin.

That gruelling four weeks can set Wayne Bennett's men up for another tilt at a top-four position. It looms as an even more critical stretch with Hunt, Milford and James Roberts all likely to be in the running for Origin debuts in the weeks that follow.





By the end of next season you'll know all about ...

It's impossible to go past former Ipswich star fullback **Carlin Anderson**, just based on the 20-year-old's natural talent. He has much to offer as either a fullback, winger or centre. Few players possess his blinding speed or instincts. "Carlin has the talent to be enormous for Brisbane," says his former Ipswich coach Shane Walker. For many footballers, shining in the NRL is all about getting an opportunity. If Anderson gets his, the crowd will be on the edge of their seat and points will flow.



Who's in, who's out and the 17 men to win you a title

COMING Carlin Anderson (Ipswich) Caleb Timu (Mormon mission) Darren Nicholls (Rabbitohs) Salesi Funaki (Wests Tigers) James Roberts (Titans)

GOING Mitchell Dodds (Warrington) Jordan Drew (Sharks) James Gavet (released) Justin Hodges (retired) Todd Lowrie (retired) Jayden Nikorima (Roosters) Matt Parcell (Sea Eagles) David Stagg (retired) Ashley Taylor (Titans) Daniel Vidot (Salford)

TOP 17 1. Darius Boyd 2. Corey Oates 3. Jack Reed 4. James Roberts 5. Jordan Kahu 6. Anthony Milford 7. Ben Hunt 8. Sam Thaiday 9. Andrew McCullough 10. Adam Blair 11. Alex Glenn 12. Matt Gillett 13. Corey Parker.

Interchange: 14. Josh McGuire 15. Jarrod Wallace 16. Joe Ofahengaue 17. Kodi Nikorima

By Joel Gould

2016 PRE-SEASON REPORT CARD



BULLDOGS

HOW'D THEY RECRUIT?

C

Will Hopoate could make fans forget about losing Tim Lafai, but the Dogs will need a young bloke to step up and replace Frank Pritchard. They're thinner at hooker with the loss of Damien Cook, too.

The bloke you can't afford to lose

Ask any Canterbury fan and they'll tell you **James Graham** is the best thing to come out of Liverpool since The Beatles. And who could blame them! It's no coincidence the Bulldogs have been to two grand finals since Graham's arrival at the club in 2012. Neither is the fact Bulldogs have won 63 per cent of their matches when he's laced on the boots but only 44 per cent when he hasn't.



By the end of next season you'll know all about...

Canterbury didn't go into the marketplace to replace Frank Pritchard – and with good reason. They already have another explosive edge back-rower on their books – **Renouf To'omaga**. The promising 20-year-old can also play in the centres.



The make-or-break stretch of the Dogs' 2016 season

We'll find out where Canterbury stand in premiership calculations during the final three weeks of the regular season, when they face both of last year's grand finalists the Broncos (Suncorp Stadium) and Cowboys (Belmore Oval) before taking on 2014 premiers the Rabbitohs (ANZ Stadium). The big thing in the Doggies' favour is that two of the matches are at home – not that there's much home advantage when playing the Bunnies at ANZ. Canterbury charged into the 2015 finals with five successive wins against the Broncos, Titans, Rabbitohs, Knights and Warriors, but with such a testing finish to the season, it's hard imagining them doing likewise in 2016.



Who's in, who's out and the 17 men to win you a title

COMING Brad Abbey (Warriors) **Graham Clark** (Northern Pride) **Craig Garvey** (Dragons) **Kerrod Holland** (Knights) **Will Hopoate** (Eels)

GOING Damien Cook (Rabbitohs) **Herman Ese'ese** (Souths Logan) **Jaline Graham** (released) **Trent Hodkinson** (Knights) **Tim Lafai** (Dragons) **Jacob Loko** (released) **Frank Pritchard** (Hull FC) **Corey Thompson** (Widnes) **Tautalatasi Tasi** (released)

TOP 17 1. Brett Morris 2. Curtis Rona 3. Josh Morris 4. Will Hopoate 5. Sam Perrett 6. Josh Reynolds 7. Moses Mbye 8. Aiden Tolman 9. Michael Lichaa 10. James Graham (c) 11. Josh Jackson 12. Tony Williams 13. Greg Eastwood. **Interchange:** 14. Sam Kasiano 15. David Klemmer 16. Shaun Lane 17. Tim Browne.

By Phil Mitchell

WHACKING ON THE KEGS
With his shoulders fully firing for the first time in two years, Reynolds has added 3kg of muscle.





Nothing beats working like a Dog!

You won't hear Josh Reynolds complaining about pre-season training being too hard **BY JOEL GOULD**

ABULKED-UP JOSH Reynolds is set to start round one with renewed vigour and two healthy shoulders.

Reconstructive surgery on both joints has hampered the 26-year-old's preparation for the past two seasons.

That never dampened Reynolds' enthusiasm, but it did impact the strength work he was able to do in the gym.

The former Blues No.6, who was a key man in NSW's 2014 series win, is a gregarious character. He's relishing being injury-free and avoiding the Canterbury rehab squad so he can attend regular training with his team-mates, especially his halves partner Moses Mbye.

Reynolds' shoulders have taken a pounding over the years but a full pre-season with both of them working for a change has enabled him to pack on a few extra kilos and build his confidence.

"Everyone says that pre-season is hard, and don't get me wrong, it is," Reynolds tells *RLW*.

"But I'm enjoying it more than I have in a long time . . . just to get in the weights room and not have to worry about anything other than lifting weights.

"I even got a compliment from Des Hasler. He said, 'Go and take a look in the mirror. Just look at ya!'

"That was pretty rare.

"I usually play at 86 or 87 kilos on average, but now I'm at 89 or 90 and it's definitely helping me.

"I hadn't been able to wrestle in two years but (Canterbury assistant coach) Jim Dymock is helping me out a lot with that and it's going well.

"The last couple of years I've felt like I was only just ready to play round one, but this year hopefully all

my skills will be strong and I'll start with a bang.

"This pre-season has been good mentally because I feel a step ahead of where I've been the past two years.

"I can go on the field and not worry that my shoulder is going to pop out.

"I've looked at Brett Morris in rehab and sometimes it's a lonely place, but I feel very privileged to be around the boys day in and day out and doing what I love."

Last year Reynolds, Moses Mbye and Trent Hodkinson were fighting to see who'd fill the starting spots in the halves.

Hodkinson's departure to the

"Moses is mature for his age (22) but I've been around for a while and I want to take on the dominant role, just in the sense of talking and making sure everyone knows what they're doing.

"Trent was really good at that and I feel as though I learned a lot off him in that sense, because sometimes I'd take a back seat.

"But now when times are tough I want to be the one to stand up and make sure that things don't go south.

"I want to take that challenge on, and Des does too. I'm really looking forward to it."

Bulldogs fans can be sure that

"I even got a compliment from Des. He said, 'Go and take a look in the mirror. Just look at ya!'"

Knights means Reynolds and Mbye can fine-tune what is almost certainly going to be the Bulldogs' first-choice halves partnership.

Reynolds played four of his 17 games off the bench in 2015, but starting alongside Mbye is where he belongs.


"Last year was hard but Des had to do what was best for the team and all three of us had to deal with what was presented to us," Reynolds says.

"Moses is in the same boat as me. I feel he's had a really good pre-season and it's good we can start on the combinations a lot earlier.

Reynolds and Mbye have a solid relationship off the field. When *RLW* spoke to Josh, the duo and their partners were headed to the beach for a barbecue.

"We want to do things together and when we have that trust and friendship off the field it makes things easier on the field," Reynolds says.

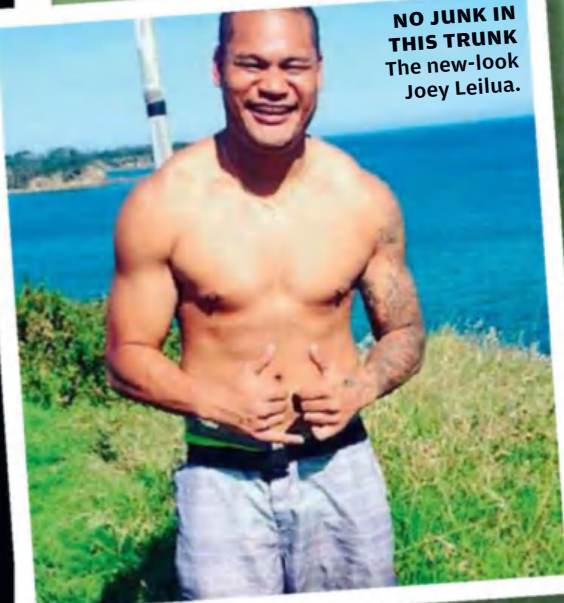
"We've said to each other that if one of us feels the other guy isn't doing something right, that we can tell each other.

"A bit of constructive criticism is something everyone needs and we're hoping to steer the boys around the park like halves need to." 

“This off-season I didn’t go to Bali or Macca’s. I just kept my head down”



NO JUNK IN THIS TRUNK
The new-look Joey Leilua.



2016 PRE-SEASON REPORT CARD

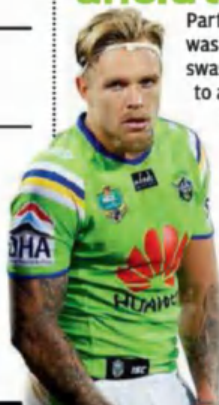


RAIDERS

HOW'D THEY RECRUIT?

C Aidan Sezer could be an excellent buy if he finally lives up to his potential under Ricky Stuart, but for now the jury's out. Ditto Jeff Lima, who at 33 could be hard-pressed to provide the same punch as the departed Shillo.

The bloke you can't afford to lose



Part pirate, part rock star, all class: **Blake Austin** was undoubtedly the buy of the 2015 season. The swashbuckling pivot provided some much-needed spark to a Canberra backline that looked pedestrian at times in 2014 – the Green Machine churned out just 466 points that year, the fifth-worst in the NRL, compared to 577 with Austin last season, making the Raiders a more potent attacking force than everyone besides the title-winning Cowboys and minor-premier Roosters. Austin's main asset is his strong running game, which yielded 17 linebreaks last year, placing him in the NRL's top 10 for that category. He was also Canberra's leading try scorer, with 14. Lose their hairy playmaker and the Raiders' attack falters.

The make-or-break stretch of the Raiders' 2016 season

Anyone else having trouble remembering the last time Canberra were a force at home? We know we are. Since Ricky Stuart took over the Green Machine in 2014, the Raiders have managed a dismal record of only seven wins from 24 starts at GIO Stadium. They won more games in the national capital during the 2013 season alone, and they finished 13th that year! With this in mind, we reckon rounds 17 through 20 will be crucial to the Raiders' success. In round 17 they host the Knights, then have a bye before two consecutive home fixtures against the Cowboys and Warriors. If Stuart's men can jag at least six competition points during that four-week period, they'll be well on their way to making their first top-eight appearance since 2012. Our recommendation to the players? Grab those ruby slippers and start chanting these simple words: "There's no place like home."



Bye bye Bali belly!

Joey Leilua is winning the losing battle and is set to go into this season in the best shape of his life **BY STEVEN RUSSO**

WHAT A DIFFERENCE a year makes. Twelve months ago Joey Leilua's career was at a crossroads. He was overweight, homeless and struggling to hold his spot at Newcastle.

After returning from Bali last January weighing 111kg, Leilua copped a public spray from then-Newcastle coach Rick Stone, who said he couldn't guarantee the Samoan international a start in round one because of poor conditioning.

Throw in the fact he had nowhere to live after housemate Adam Cuthbertson moved to England, and it was clear Leilua wasn't enjoying life in the Hunter.

Last June the Knights granted Leilua a release to immediately join the Raiders but his woes didn't end there. Still sporting a sloppy rig, he couldn't even complete a simple 1.2km run in under five minutes.

But after spending his off-season break in Sydney training with his brother, Dragons NYC star Luciano, the blockbusting centre has dropped to 106kg and is poised to recapture the form that earned him a call-up to an extended NSW Origin squad in 2012.

"This off-season I didn't go as hard as I usually do," Leilua says. "Last year I went to Bali and I enjoyed

myself for a couple weeks and came back a bit overweight. This year I didn't go to Bali or Macca's! I just kept my head down. Our strength and conditioning coach Nigel Ashley-Jones gave us a program to get a few miles into our legs, and I really stuck to it.

"I'm from Arncliffe and my parents still live there, so I stayed with them during our break and started training with two of my cousins and younger brother. We went down to Gardiner Park in Banksia, where we used to play when we were kids.

"The target was to run 1.2km in four minutes and 30 seconds. We were way off when we first started . . . I think on our first run I clocked about 5:10. But as we went on, we got closer and closer and we were eventually well under.

"We trained at least three days a week. It was tough but it was good having the boys pushing me through."

As you can see from our pictures, the training has clearly worked for the 24-year-old. He is markedly slimmer and shows no signs of hanging out with Ronald, Hamburglar and Mayor McCheese.

Of course, a change of diet proved important, too. Like 2015 RLW Player of the Year Roger Tuivasa-Sheck, Leilua attributes his weight loss to releasing his inner MasterChef with housemate Sam Williams.

"I used to eat a lot of McDonald's," he confesses. "I would have a Big Mac and 10 nuggets for lunch or dinner about twice week.

"These days I cook for myself. My speciality is salmon with vegies, and I like a bit of stir fry. While I cook five days a week, I can have a bit of 'sometimes food' on the weekend . . . like the Cookie Monster."

It hasn't been all smooth sailing for Leilua, though. During pre-season testing last November, the one-time City Origin rep earned himself an extra two weeks' training when he missed the cut-off time for a 1.2km run by just three seconds.

"That was a burner," he says. "I was supposed to get a time of 4:45 but I got 4:48. I was filthy but I was happy I got so close . . . I probably needed the extra training anyway."

Ashley-Jones is adamant that since arriving at the Raiders, Leilua has defied the reputation he earned at the Knights for being a lazy trainer.

"Joey came with a reputation but we chose to ignore it," he says.

"The first thing he said when he arrived was that he didn't like weights but after we went through all the benefits, he just jumped straight in.

"When he missed that conditioning target by three seconds he was gutted but he didn't whinge or whine." **RLW**



By the end of next season you'll know all about...

When an NRL club signs a 12-year-old to a scholarship you know there must be something special about him. Hailing from the tiny town of Miles, 350km west of Brisbane, rookie prop **Luke Bateman** first made headlines in 2013 when selected for Queensland in Under-20s Origin before he even made his NYC debut. A junior swimming champion, Bateman represented the Sunshine State in butterfly before turning his attention solely to league. Having debuted in round one against Cronulla, the 20-year-old made six appearances in first grade last year, and will no doubt build on that tally in 2016.



Who's in, who's out and the 17 men to win you a title

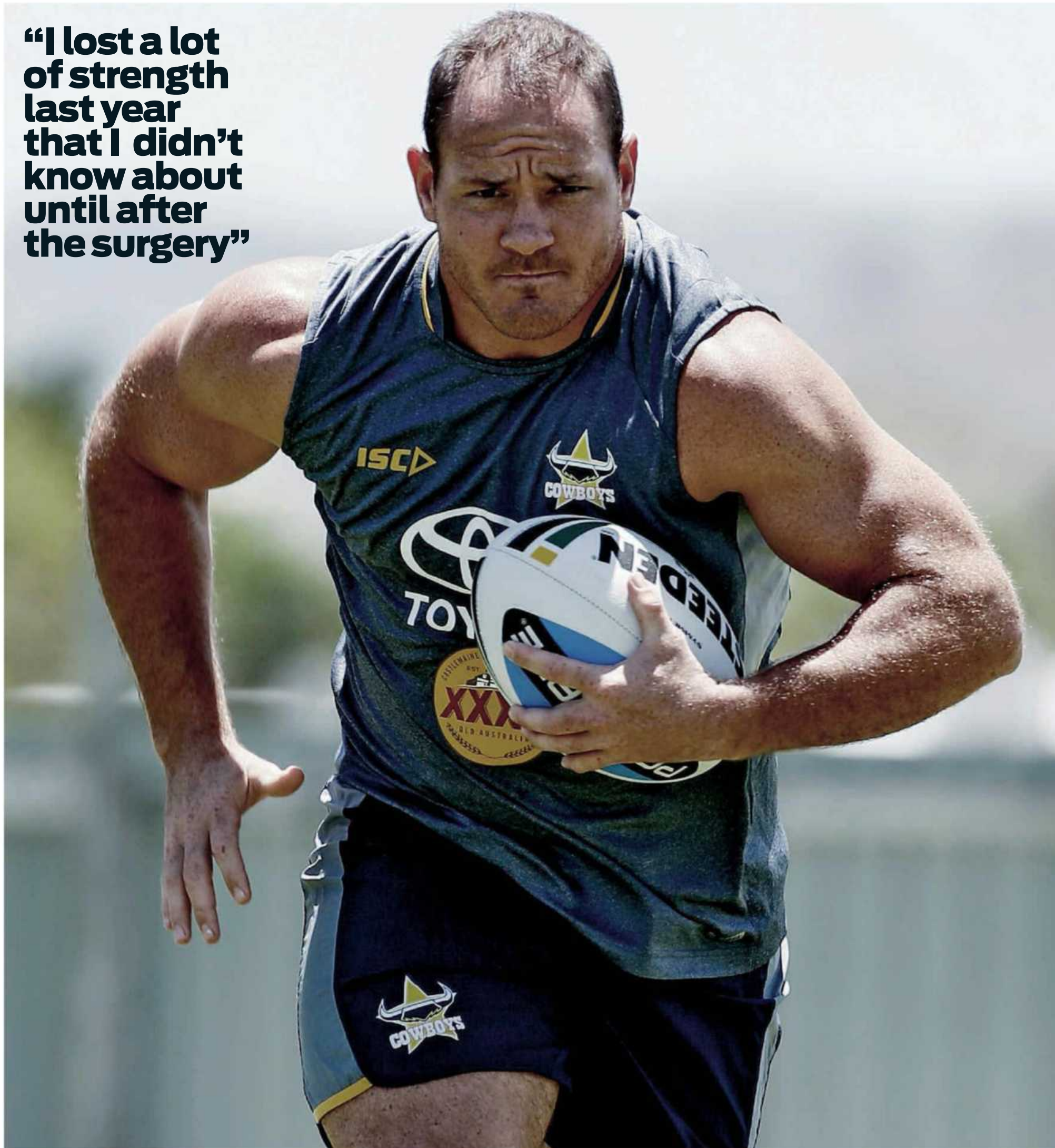
COMING Adam Clydsdale (Knights) Jeff Lima (Catalans) Aidan Sezer (Titans) Zac Santo (Cowboys) Elliot Whitehead (Catalans)

GOING Jack Ahearn (Redcliffe) Glen Buttriss (Mounties) Mitch Cornish (Eels) Mitch Cronin (Wynnum Manly) Joel Edwards (Wests Tigers) Jeremy Hawkins (Storm) Andrew Heffernan (Panthers) Jeff Lynch (Titans) Josh McCrone (Dragons) Mark Nicholls (Storm) Kyle O'Donnell (retired) David Shillington (Titans)

TOP 17 1. Jack Wighton 2. Edrick Lee 3. Jarrod Croker (c) 4. Joey Leilua 5. Sisa Waqa 6. Blake Austin 7. Aidan Sezer 8. Frank-Paul Nuuausala 9. Josh Hodgson 10. Paul Vaughan 11. Josh Papalii 12. Iosia Soliola 13. Shaun Fensom. Interchange: 14. Adam Clydsdale 15. Elliot Whitehead 16. Jeff Lima 17. Shannon Boyd.

By Steven Russo

**“I lost a lot
of strength
last year
that I didn’t
know about
until after
the surgery”**



2015 was a pain in the neck

...but world-beating prop Matt Scott is ready to rip in like never before after surgery **BY JOEL GOULD**

THE PAIN IS GONE, AND now Matt Scott is exercising muscles he'd forgotten how to use and regaining strength he didn't realise he'd lost.

Scott told *RLW* after the Cowboys' grand final triumph that a pinched nerve in his neck was causing constant pain, numbness and tingles down his arm.

But post-season surgery has been such a success that he feels like a new man and is focused on playing in next month's World Club Challenge.

"It's a huge relief. I could notice the difference as soon as I woke up out of surgery," he says.

"They opened me up and shaved a few bone spurs off the vertebrae, trimmed the disc up and pretty much gave me more room for the nerves to move so they're not pinching.

"The pain in my arms, back and chest, which was referring from my neck, has all gone.

"All the pins and needles down my arm and in my fingers are gone.

"A couple of weeks after the surgery, once the wound had healed, it felt so different and so much better."

Scott's pre-season program has been modified accordingly.

He's completed the standard conditioning and running and has his own weights program, but no contact work. The focus has been on getting miles in his legs and becoming stronger.

"I lost a lot of strength last year

that I didn't know about until after I had the surgery, but I'm doing things now to get that strength back and turning a few different muscles on that I wasn't using last year," says 'Thumper'.

"A lot of the work I'm doing is in the gym at the moment, the same sort of stuff that Jimmy Tamou went through last year after a similar injury.

"I'm getting a bit of muscle mass back. The goal is to push back into a bit of contact by the end of January so that by the start of February I hope to be back in full training for a couple of weeks for the World Club Challenge."

Bulk isn't the only area he's looking to improve in, either.

"Ball skills is one," Scott admits. "It's an area front-rowers have started to evolve in, and more and more we're seeing front-rowers used as first receivers for shifts.

"Fitness is going to be a factor with the decrease in interchanges ... again, improvement is needed."

The Maroons bookend will be 32 when his deal expires in 2017 and he'll almost certainly be seeking an extension at the Cowboys.

"I'd like to finish my career here," says Scott, who hopes to follow in Petero Civoniceva's footsteps.

"Bula' was a special individual," he reckons. "He did get better with age and the last seasons that he played were his best years. I can take confidence from that and try and emulate what he did."

Complacency is always a worry

for any club backing up from a premiership but Scott insists it won't be a concern for the Cowboys.

"We know we have a bit of a target on our head," he says.

"The leadership group has had a talk about it with Greeny (Paul Green) and I know from the feel of the squad when we came back to training that there was no complacency.

"Guys were coming back and hitting their targets and coming back in good shape. That's a fair indication of where everyone's heads are at."

Scott, who averaged 52.4 minutes per game in 2015, plays at about 109kg but expects that to drop by no more than 1kg with the reduction in interchanges.

He says the switch won't have a huge impact on the Cowboys, who boast back-rowers who can play for long stints.

"We've also got a very strong bench with guys like Ben Hannant and Scott Bolton who can also play long minutes, so I don't think it will affect us that much so long as we can keep that same team on the field that we finished with last year.

"A lot of times we had a couple of interchanges up our sleeve by the end.

"It'll be a matter of seeing how we go but we do have more of an emphasis on fitness at the moment.

"We're really trying to drive our fitness targets so that if we need a bit more in the tank, we've all got it." **RLW**

2016 PRE-SEASON REPORT CARD



COWBOYS

HOW'D THEY RECRUIT?

B+

Comp-winning sides that return the next year with the same starting 17 are very rare, but that's exactly what the FNQ side has done.

The bloke you can't afford to lose

At the risk of sounding like Captain Obvious, it has to be Captain Fantastic. We hit up stats guru David Middleton to find another Cowboy who might come close in terms of the side winning when he plays and losing when he doesn't, but the computer just kept spitting out the name **Thurston**. And why not? If the Maroons and Australia find it hard to live without him, you wouldn't really expect his club side to be any different. In 2016 JT will miss two games on Origin duty (Dragons and Raiders). If he's out for others, the title defence could be shaky.



By the end of next season you'll know all about...

Giant teenage back-rower **Coen Hess** scored two tries in his Intrust Super Cup debut for Mackay, and he scored again on NRL debut against the Warriors in August. As Cowboys Under-20s coach Todd Payten told *RLW*, "Coen is going to be a superstar and one out of the box".



The make-or-break stretch of the Cowboys' 2016 season

Plenty of experts will be tipping the premiers to drop their bundle during the Origin period but we reckon the stretch between rounds 16 and 18 can be the making of the Cowboys. It kicks off with a Monday-night home clash against Manly, which means their Origin stars will have had five days to recover from Game Two. In round 17 they're 'away' to Souths in Cairns – a mere one-hour flight from Townsville and a venue at which JT and his men will enjoy raucous support. And speaking of JT, he'll be missing in round 18 when they travel to Canberra, but road trips don't scare this mob anymore. Besides, the week after that they get the bye and a gift two points.

Who's in, who's out and the 17 men to win you a title

COMING Shaun Hudson (Titans) Jahrome Hughes (Townsville Blackhawks)

GOING Glenn Hall (Townsville Blackhawks) Vilame Kikau (Panthers) Cameron King (Eels) Robert Lui (Salford) Hezron Murgha (Townsville Blackhawks) Zac Santo (Raiders) Scott Schulte (Eels) Kelepi Tanginoo (Eels)

TOP 17 1. Lachlan Coote 2. Kyle Feldt 3. Justin O'Neill 4. Kane Linnett 5. Antonio Winterstein 6. Michael Morgan 7. Johnathan Thurston (c) 8. Matt Scott (c) 9. Jake Granville 10. James Tamou 11. Gavin Cooper 12. Ethan Lowe 13. Jason Taumalolo. Interchange: 14. Rory Kostjasyn 15. John Asiata 16. Scott Bolton 17. Ben Hannant.

By Martin Lenehan

Shillo's steep learning curve

David Shillington is getting some serious miles in his legs as he prepares to play more minutes at his new club **BY JOEL GOULD**

BIG-NAME RECRUIT David Shillington knows only too well that the Titans have a huge mountain to climb to drag themselves off the bottom of the ladder.

But if scaling actual mountains counts for anything then the embattled club may just surprise a few people this year.

Shillo and his mates have been busting a gut in the pre-season tackling the infamous Currumbin stairs, which number about 130, and the imposing hill behind North Burleigh Surf Club.

Once a week in November and December the Titans had gruelling 90-minute sessions at North Burleigh. Each session included 12 sets of full runs up the hill, 12 half-circuits and about 20 shorter efforts.

"I had our strength and conditioner, Matt Ford, at Canberra before he went down to Melbourne, and he has picked up some nasty tricks at the Storm and brought them to the Titans," Shillington grins.

"He's trained us really hard and although it's tough we're obviously going to be rewarded for that when the season comes around.

"From start to finish the runs at North Burleigh are about 300m, and the hill is close to 100m (high).

"They run us from a couple of hundred metres back from the hill.

"By the time we hit the hill we're tired, but then you charge up to the

top around a bend that is pretty steep.

"Then we walk down half-way, jog the rest to recovery and then go again. There have been a few boys crook from the workload. It's incredibly hot and humid. It's tough work.

Body language is a big thing for Shillington and he refuses to let on how much pain he's in.

"I have coped just fine," he says.

"You put on a strong face even if you are absolutely buggered.

"We talk amongst ourselves about standing tall and staying strong. Then you can help out the young players who are doing it tough and give them a few tips on hydrating properly."

The 32-year-old prop, who has played eight Origins for the Maroons and 14 Tests for Australia, knows the interchange reduction means he will need to be fighting fit to start the season.

He may play as low as 112kg in 2016, and believes props will need to extend their minutes to be part of the modern game.

"We had an army camp where it was full-on for three days. It was the hardest week I've ever done in my life," he says.

"I came back (to pre-season) at 114kg, bulked up to 117 and then the camp stripped three kilos back off me. Last year I played at around 115 kilos, which is on the heavier side for me.

"If I can scale down to 112, that will allow me to get through more

minutes. I will be right to play at least 60 minutes."

The Titans' training is different to what Shillington had experienced in Canberra, across the board.

"We're doing more tackling/wrestle sessions rather than full-on Greco-Roman wrestle sessions . . . and the running is a lot different," he says.

"We were doing five or six 1200m sessions in Canberra, whereas the most we're running here is about 80m at a time on the field, while the hill runs go about 300m max."

The Titans players are split into eight groups based on their maximum aerobic speed results, and Shillington is holding his own.

"I am in the third group, and there are about eight groups," he says.

"Ryan James is in the second group and would be the fittest forward."

Shillington is a wonderful signing for the Gold Coast with his impeccable on and off-field credentials. The move to the Titans makes sense on many levels.

"It's coming towards the end for me, but it's a dream come true to come home, being a Brissie boy," he says. "My wife is from Brisbane as well, and with two young kids, I've joined a club that's rebuilding, trying to grow and get stronger.

"All of those things stacked up well in my mind.

"I'm really happy with the decision."



2016 PRE-SEASON REPORT CARD



TITANS

HOW'D THEY RECRUIT?

The James Roberts saga left a sour taste and it remains to be seen whether Nathan Friend, Chris McQueen or Tyrone Roberts can make it all sweet. All three will rip in but pulling this team out of the doldrums seems a forlorn hope.



The bloke you can't afford to lose

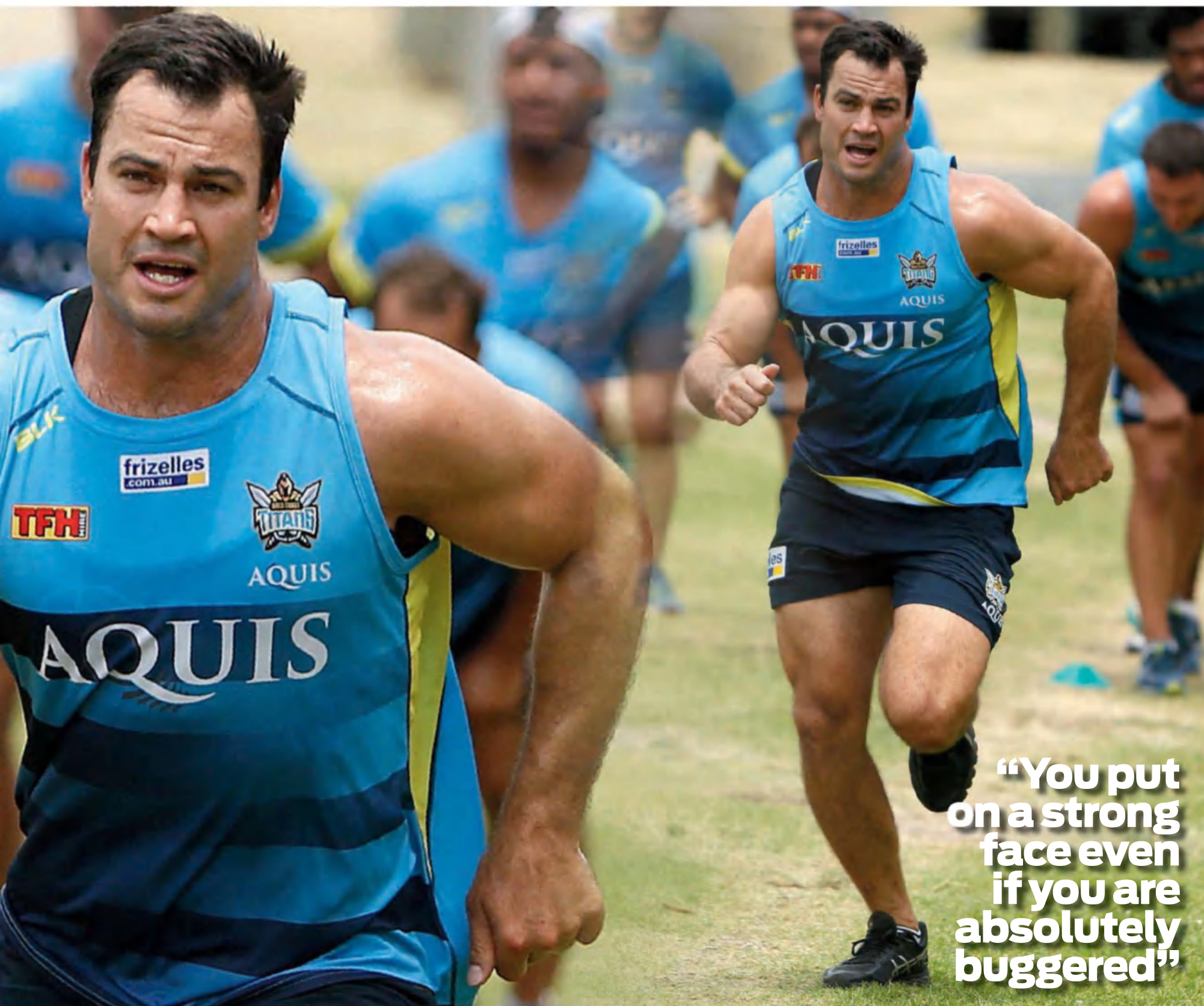
Greg Bird is the Titans' most experienced player and he also leads the way when it comes to toughness, competitiveness and talent. There aren't too many footballers in the NRL who would come close to being both the best forward and the best back in their club, but Bird has some claim to that title. At his most damaging, the 31-year-old is a match-winning back-rower at Origin level, while he has also won man-of-the-match honours for NSW as a five-eighth.

The season-ending knee injury to Kane Elgey means Bird could play long stints in the halves for the Glitter Strip side. Injury and suspension restricted Bird to only 12 games in 2015, his fewest number of games in a season since 2004. He'll need to at least double that in 2016 for the Titans to have any show of staying alive for the finals.

The make-or-break stretch of Gold Coast's 2016 season

The Titans start the season as short-priced favourites for the wooden spoon. Their first month of action against the Knights (home), Storm (away), Tigers (home) and Raiders (away) will tell whether that prediction's on the money. While none of those are easy games, three of the teams finished outside the top eight in 2015. Rest assured, the Titans have tougher months of football ahead of them in 2016. The question mark over the Gold Coast is where will the points come from? The Knights, Tigers and Raiders haven't been known for their defensive steel of late, so the Titans' attack will get the opportunity to at least build some continuity in March. They must win three of those first four to have any chance of figuring in finals footy. Considering the club's history of dire form in July and August, it's vital they start the year with gusto.





“You put on a strong face even if you are absolutely buggered”



By the end of next season you'll know all about...

He may not start the season in the NRL side but by the end of 2016 former Junior Kangaroos half **Ashley Taylor** will have made a name for himself. There are parallels with Kane Elgey when predicting how the upcoming season should unfold for the 20-year-old. Elgey was left out of the Titans side in the first month of 2015 but once he got his chance he was a permanent fixture. Taylor has the skill, toughness and mental strength to be a long-term halves partner alongside Elgey. Five years ago Broncos legend Steve Renouf told *RLW* that Taylor was a future gun. Renouf, as ever, was right on the money.



Who's in, who's out, and the 17 men to win you a title

COMING Nathan Friend (Warriors) Jeff Lynch (Raiders) Chris McQueen (Rabbitohs) Tyrone Roberts (Knights) David Shillington (Raiders) Zeb Taia (Catalans) Ashley Taylor (Broncos)

GOING Caleb Binge (Wynnum Manly) Davin Crampton (Redcliffe) Jamie Dowling (Burlleigh) Kalifa Falfai Loa (Dragons) Beau Falloon (Leeds) Jamal Fogarty (Burlleigh) Kevin Gordon (released) Christian Hazard (Redcliffe) Shaun Hudson (Cowboys) Jai Ingram (released) Nate Myles (Sea Eagles) Chad Redman (Burlleigh) Ben Ridge (retired) James Roberts (Broncos) Aidan Sezer (Raiders) Dave Taylor (Catalans) Brad Tighe (retired) Matt White (Storm)

TOP 17 1. Josh Hoffman 2. David Mead 3. William Zillman 4. Nene Macdonald 5. Anthony Don 6. Tyrone Roberts 7. Ashley Taylor 8. David Shillington 9. Nathan Friend 10. Luke Douglas 11. Ryan James 12. Chris McQueen 13. Greg Bird. Interchange: 14. Eddy Pettybourne 15. Zeb Taia 16. Agnatiuss Paasi 17. Kierran Moseley.

By Joel Gould



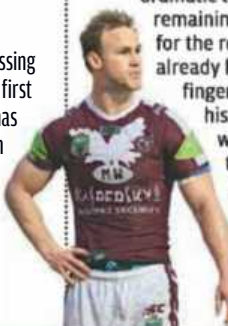
SEA EAGLES

HOW'D THEY RECRUIT?

A The despair of missing the finals for the first time since 2004 has dissipated and gun recruits Myles, Tapau, Walker and Brown will ensure it doesn't happen again.

The bloke you can't afford to lose

Manly thought they had lost **Daly Cherry-Evans** for 2016 and were preparing for life without their gifted playmaker until a dramatic turn of events led to him remaining an Eagle and re-signing for the rest of his career. At 26, DCE already has a premiership ring on his finger, a Churchill Medal around his neck and the rugby league world at his feet, and he's the man Manly simply can't live without. Despite all the distractions of the 'backflip' saga, DCE still managed 15 try assists and 11 line break assists in 2015.



By the end of next season you'll know all about...

Dylan Walker is the man most likely to wear the No.6 but Manly have a handy back-up in **Tom Wright**, a product of famed rugby nursery St Joseph's College. The rah-rahs were desperate to hang onto the kid with the dancing feet but even the lure of the Rio Olympics wasn't enough to sway him.



The make-or-break stretch of Manly's 2016 season

Debate has raged over Manly being forced to endure a five-day turnaround four times and copping a heap of games in the Monday night 'graveyard shift'. The most critical 19 days of the Sea Eagles' season looms as the period between Saturday, March 26 and Thursday, April 14 – kicking off with a blockbuster clash against the Roosters at Allianz Stadium in round four, followed by Souths at Brookvale on a five-day turnaround. Then in round six it's the new-look Warriors at a heaving Mt Smart Stadium on April 9 and finally Kieran Foran returns to Brookie on April 14 for a round-seven showdown. That horror stretch will tell us much about rookie coach Trent Barrett and Manly's prospects for 2016.



Who's in, who's out and the 17 men to win you a title

COMING **Lewis Brown** (Panthers) **Fabian Goodall** (Eels) **Nathan Green** (Dragons) **Isaac John** (Panthers) **Api Koroisau** (Panthers) **Darcy Lussick** (Eels) **Tim Moltzen** (Wests Tigers) **Nate Myles** (Titans) **Matt Parcell** (Broncos) **Martin Taupau** (Wests Tigers) **Dylan Walker** (Rabbitohs) **John Walker** (Sevens rugby) **Tom Wright** (Schoolboy rugby)

GOING **Tyson Andrews** (Redcliffe) **Matt Ballin** (Wests Tigers) **Cheyse Blair** (Storm) **Michael Chee-Kam** (Wests Tigers) **Kieran Foran** (Eels) **Clinton Gutherson** (Eels) **James Hasson** (Eels) **Peta Hiku** (Panthers) **Justin Horo** (Catalans) **Jack Littlejohn** (Wests Tigers) **Dunamis Lui** (Dragons) **Willie Mason** (released) **Will Pearsall** (Knights) **Ligi Sao** (Warriors) **Jesse Sene-Lefao** (Sharks) **Siosaia Vave** (released) **David Williams** (retired)

TOP 17 1. Brett Stewart 2. Jorge Taufua 3. Jamie Lyon (c) 4. Steve Matai 5. Tom Trbojevic 6. Dylan Walker 7. Daly Cherry-Evans 8. Nate Myles 9. Matt Parcell 10. Jake Trbojevic 11. Feleti Mateo 12. Lewis Brown 13. Martin Taupau. **Interchange:** 14. Darcy Lussick 15. Tom Symonds 16. Brenton Lawrence 17. Api Koroisau.

By Martin Lenehan

TOGETHER AGAIN
Barrett and Jamie Lyon played Origin alongside each other. Now they're teaming up in a very different way.





This rookie's one smart cookie

Myles and Tapau are great signings, but Manly's most important recruit could be Trent Barrett **BY SHAYNE BUGDEN**

THERE ARE MORE questions surrounding the Sea Eagles' 2016 season than there are idiots in federal parliament. How will their first-time coach go? Will all their high-profile signings fire? Are last year's dramas fully behind them? And who'll slot in at pivot to cover the huge loss of Kieran Foran?

RLW has a scoop for you on that last one: it definitely won't be Trent Barrett.

Asked if sorting the club's situation at five-eighth is a special interest of his given his incredible career in the No.6 jumper, he laughs, "I'm too old to play!"

"But yeah, it is a special interest. We're very lucky to have a dominant half in Daly (Cherry-Evans), plus Brett Stewart at fullback, and a hooker in Matt Parcell who can really control the ruck. All of that does enable me to use a running player at five-eighth."

According to Barrett, whoever gets the nod won't have to worry about much other than playing what he sees in front of him. He's keen for Cherry-Evans to steer the team around the park and take the pressure off his halves partner.

"Daly's at a stage in his career where he can take his game to another level," Barrett reckons.

"He does things on the field that other people can't do. We're lucky to have him, and I do want him to take control."

That's not the only bit of good fortune the first-time mentor has going for him at Manly, though.

Dealing with the huge workload of a head coach is the first challenge he mentions about his new job, but he's got great back-up to help with that.

"It doesn't stop, that's for sure," he says. "The biggest difference is all the peripheral stuff you have to deal with. When you're the assistant it's pure football, and as the head coach you don't do as much hands-on stuff. But I've got two very good assistants in John Cartwright and Anthony Seibold."

Barrett's also got one hell of a playing list to work with, courtesy of some very strong recruiting that's added a bunch of guns to an already world-class crew of old hands.

"The club veterans – Brett Stewart, Steve Matai, Jamie Lyon – have been standouts," he says of his first impressions after seven weeks

“Daly does things on the field that other people can't do”

with the side. "Then we've brought in Lewis Brown and Nate Myles. They're all good leaders and terrific trainers, and they've been invaluable to me . . . They're all very honest with their feedback."

Barrett is guarded about his expectations for the team.

He won't say where he'd be happy to see them finish on the ladder, and he wasn't giving anything away on who's leading the race to be five-eighth, except to say he has "a few

ideas on that" and that he definitely won't be making a decision until he picks the team for the round one clash with Canterbury.

However, he's quick to point out one area he wants the Sea Eagles to turn the corner in.

"Defensively we can improve a fair bit on last year," he maintains.

"There are a few things from my point of view that we can fix . . . We know what we want to achieve, and we're lucky to have a good squad with plenty of ability. But that by itself doesn't guarantee you wins. We've got to be disciplined."

Next season will be the first time since 2004 that Manly's been coached by someone who wasn't a legendary player for them. The "insular peninsula" tag fits the team like a glove, so it's only natural to wonder if Barrett's concerned about being an outsider.

"I can't control that, so I haven't thought about it, to be honest," he says. "There's pressure with every first-grade job, and it's a high-profile club. If I start thinking about things I can't control, I'll lose focus."

Pressed on whether all the changes at Brookvale will actually make it easier for him to mould the club into his own image, the former NSW and Kangaroo star admits, "Yeah, but I wouldn't have changed what I want to do regardless of how many players were here from before."

"I've been pretty clear on what I want and I have very clear ideas about the culture and the style of footy we'll play. I'm lucky that we've recruited very well."

Come the end of 2016, Sea Eagles fans will be hoping they feel lucky to have Barrett sitting in the coach's box. **RLW**

“Going into the semi-finals knowing I wasn’t going to play was the toughest bit of it”



2016 PRE-SEASON REPORT CARD



MELBOURNE STORM

HOW'D THEY RECRUIT?

B-

If things went differently in the second half of their prelim against the Cowboys, this was a grand final team. So not a lot of holes to fill in the off-season, but it would've been nice to see them get more quality depth. Should still be finals-bound but the big three's age is an increasing worry.

The bloke you can't afford to lose

Courtesy of his outstanding work as replacement fullback in 2015, Cameron Munster keeps Billy Slater out of this spot. And Cameron Smith's about as injury-prone as a Toyota Hilux made of Kevlar, so **Cooper Cronk** gets the nod. The Storm are masters of plugging holes in their side but they can only do so much here. Even Daly Cherry-Evans couldn't match Cronk's poise, polish and end-of-set magic when he briefly took his place in Origin last year. Ben Hampton was Melbourne's fall-back half in 2015 and should be once again. But if it comes to that, expect to hear even more swearing than usual from Craig Bellamy.



The make-or-break stretch of the Storm's 2016 season

The Melbourne boys got lucky when the schedule was drawn out of a hat at NRL headquarters. The Storm don't have to get up for many consecutive games against last year's best teams, and they play the bottom three clubs from 2015 – the Titans, Tigers and Knights – twice each. But come rounds 20, 21 and 22 they run into the Roosters (home), Cowboys (away) and Bunnie (home). If they play to their usual standard, the lads from Bleak City should be trying to push further up the top eight by then, and those contests will have a huge bearing on their chances of getting into the all-important top four and nailing yet another premiership win.



The end isn't nigh

Brilliant Melbourne fullback Billy Slater is coming back with a vengeance from his longest stint on the sidelines **BY JOEL GOULD**

HAS THERE EVER BEEN a bigger question mark over Billy Slater in his incredible 13 seasons in the game?

There wouldn't be a footy fan who isn't wondering if he can return to top form after a long spell on the sidelines following major surgery on his left shoulder.

The man himself is optimistic and determined to finish his career on a high, while Storm football manager Frank Ponissi is backing Slater to return to the scintillating football the Maroons and Kangaroos star has become renowned for.

By the time the season kicks off Slater will have played just seven NRL games in the previous 18 months, by far his driest spell in terms of matches played since he scorched his way onto the scene as a 19-year-old in 2003.

He had a labral tear of his glenohumeral joint, which is surgeon-speak for a tear in the soft tissue that connects the upper arm bone to the shoulder socket. Slater also had right shoulder surgery at the end of 2014, and both joints have taken a battering.

Signed with the Storm until the end of 2017, Slater would like to continue playing beyond that point, but it depends on how his body holds up.

Shortly before Christmas, he wasn't quite back to full training, but

he wasn't far off it. He'd done a lot of running and some controlled contact, with full contact planned for January with a view to playing in the Auckland Nines.

"There's still a bit to go before I get to 100 per cent but everything's going to plan. I'm feeling good and the shoulder is coming along well but there's a lengthy recovery period for this type of operation," Slater says.

"I'm stepping it up at training week by week. Hopefully in the new year I can ramp it up, get some contact into me and really push the limits on it.

"The way I look at (the future), and now more so than ever, is that I'll just take it as it comes.

"I'm not even looking at my full two years.

"I've had a number of injuries over the last five years, but now I'm focused on this pre-season and getting my body in the best shape I can to finish my career off.

"Whether that will be next year, the year after or in three or four years' time, I'm not sure.

"I just want to play my best football right up until the end."

That includes making himself available for rep footy.

"I still have a huge ambition to play for Queensland and Australia. Those drives are as strong as they are to play for the Storm," the 32-year-old maintains.

"I've been fortunate in that while I've had a lot of injuries, they haven't kept me off the paddock too much, up until 2015.

"I must say it was a lot harder than what I anticipated. Seeing the boys play each week was quite tough and going into the semi-finals knowing I wasn't going to play a part was the toughest bit of it."

Ponissi insists there's "nothing to suggest that Billy can't get back to where he was" as a player, based purely on his attitude and application.

"He's personally set himself a goal of playing in the Nines and there's nothing to suggest that he won't," Ponissi says.

"He's obviously got to be 100 per cent and have done a lot of contact work at training to get the green light from the staff.

"Darren Lockyer showed in his mid-30s that he was a more than influential player and was still playing rep football in his last year.

"Billy's a total professional in the way he looks after himself on and off the field, and having almost three-quarters of last season off is certainly going to extend his career.

"When players start to drop off in the little things, that's when you know their desire and passion is starting to wane, but that couldn't be further from the truth with Bill." **RLW**



By the end of next season you'll know all about...

Scoring 20 tries in 18 NYC games tends to get you noticed. **Tony Tumusa** did just that for the Storm in 2015, and got a new contract and a call-up to the Junior Kiwis as a result. Melbourne have lost outside backs Matt Duffie, Kurt Mann and Mahe Fonua, improving the Auckland-born winger's chances of hitting first grade with his tenacious – and bloody fast – ball-running. Tumusa looks like he's been shot out of a cannon when he spots a hole out of dummy-half and that makes him lethal when his team is working out of their own end.



Who's in, who's out and the 17 men to win you a title

COMING Cheyse Blair (Sea Eagles) **Scott Drinkwater** (Roosters) **Jeremy Hawkins** (Raiders) **Mark Nicholls** (Raiders) **Curtis Scott** (Sharks) **Matthew White** (Titans)

GOING Matt Duffie (Auckland Blues rugby) **Mahe Fonua** (Hull FC) **Ryan Hinchcliffe** (Huddersfield) **Hymel Hunt** (Rabbitohs) **Tom Learoyd-Lahrs** (retired) **Kurt Mann** (Dragons) **Charnze Nicoll-Klokstad** (Warriors) **Shaun Nona** (released) **Dayne Weston** (Leigh)

TOP 17 1. Billy Slater 2. Marika Koroibete 3. Will Chambers 4. Cameron Munster 5. Cheyse Blair 6. Blake Green 7. Cooper Cronk 8. Jesse Bromwich 9. Cameron Smith (c) 10. Jordan McLean 11. Kevin Proctor 12. Tohu Harris 13. Dale Finucane. Interchange: 14. Kenny Bromwich 15. Tim Glasby 16. Felise Kaufusi 17. Nelson Asofa-Solomona

By Shayne Bugden

2016



ROUND 1 ● All kick-off times are local time

Thursday, March 3

Eels v Broncos at Pirtek Stadium, 8.05pm

Friday, March 4

Sea Eagles v Bulldogs at Brookvale Oval, 8.05pm

Saturday, March 5

Raiders v Panthers at GIO Stadium, 3pm

Tigers v Warriors at Campbelltown Stadium, 5.30pm

Cowboys v Sharks at 1300Smiles Stadium, 6.30pm

Sunday, March 6

Roosters v Rabbitohs at Allianz Stadium, 4pm

Titans v Knights at Cbus Super Stadium, 5.30pm

Monday, March 7

Storm v Dragons at AAMI Park, 7pm

ROUND 2

Thursday, March 10

Panthers v Bulldogs at Pepper Stadium, 8.05pm

Friday, March 11

Broncos v Warriors at Suncorp Stadium, 7.05pm

Saturday, March 12

Raiders v Roosters at GIO Stadium, 3pm

Rabbitohs v Knights at ANZ Stadium, 5.30pm

Eels v Cowboys at Pirtek Stadium, 7.30pm

Sunday, March 13

Sharks v Dragons at Shark Park, 4pm

Storm v Titans at AAMI Park, 6.30pm

Monday, March 14

Tigers v Sea Eagles at Leichhardt Oval, 7pm

ROUND 3

Thursday, March 17

Cowboys v Roosters at 1300Smiles Stadium, 7.05pm

Friday, March 18

Bulldogs v Eels at ANZ Stadium, 8.05pm

Saturday, March 19

Knights v Raiders at Hunter Stadium, 5.30pm

Panthers v Broncos at Pepper Stadium, 7.30pm

Titans v Tigers at Cbus Super Stadium, 8.30pm

Sunday, March 20

Warriors v Storm at Mt Smart Stadium, 4pm

Dragons v Rabbitohs at SCG 4pm

Monday, March 21

Sea Eagles v Sharks at Brookvale Oval, 7pm

ROUND 4

Friday, March 25

Rabbitohs v Bulldogs at ANZ Stadium, 4pm

Broncos v Cowboys at Suncorp Stadium, 7.05pm

Saturday, March 26

Raiders v Titans at GIO Stadium, 5.30pm

Roosters v Sea Eagles at Allianz Stadium, 7.30pm

Sunday, March 27

Dragons v Panthers at WIN Stadium, 4pm

Monday, March 28

Warriors v Knights at Mt Smart Stadium, 4pm

Tigers v Eels at ANZ Stadium, 4pm

Sharks v Storm at Shark Park, 7pm

ROUND 5

Thursday, March 31

Sea Eagles v Rabbitohs at Brookvale Oval, 8.05pm

Friday, April 1

Titans v Broncos at Cbus Super Stadium, 7.05pm

Saturday, April 2

Storm v Knights at AAMI Park, 3pm

Tigers v Sharks at Campbelltown Stadium, 5.30pm

Cowboys v Dragons at 1300Smiles Stadium, 6.30pm

Sunday, April 3

Roosters v Warriors at Central Coast Stadium, 2pm

Eels v Panthers at Pirtek Stadium, 4pm

Monday, April 4

Bulldogs v Raiders at Belmore Sports Ground, 7pm

ROUND 6

Thursday, April 7

Broncos v Dragons at Suncorp Stadium, 7.50pm

Friday, April 8

Rabbitohs v Roosters at ANZ Stadium, 7.50pm

Saturday, April 9

Eels v Raiders at Pirtek Stadium, 3pm

Warriors v Sea Eagles at Mt Smart Stadium, 7.30pm

Panthers v Cowboys at Pepper Stadium, 7.30pm

Sunday, April 10

Sharks v Titans at Shark Park, 2pm

Knights v Tigers at Hunter Stadium, 4pm

Monday, April 11

Storm v Bulldogs at AAMI Park, 7pm

ROUND 7

Thursday, April 14

Sea Eagles v Eels at Brookvale Oval, 7.50pm

Friday, April 15

Cowboys v Rabbitohs at 1300Smiles Stadium, 7.50pm

Saturday, April 16

Titans v Dragons at Cbus Super Stadium, 3pm

Bulldogs v Warriors at Westpac Stadium, Wellington 7.30pm

Broncos v Knights at Suncorp Stadium, 7.30pm

Sunday, April 17

Raiders v Sharks at GIO Stadium, 2pm

Tigers v Storm at Leichhardt Oval, 4pm

Monday, April 18

Roosters v Panthers at Allianz Stadium, 7pm

ROUND 8

Friday, April 22

Broncos v Rabbitohs at Suncorp Stadium, 7.50pm

Saturday, April 23

Bulldogs v Titans at ANZ Stadium, 3pm

Raiders v Tigers at GIO Stadium, 5.30pm

Cowboys v Eels at 1300Smiles Stadium, 7.30pm

Sunday, April 24

Sharks v Panthers at Shark Park, 4pm

Monday, April 25

Knights v Sea Eagles at Hunter Stadium, 2pm

Dragons v Roosters at Allianz Stadium, 4pm

Storm v Warriors at AAMI Park, 7pm

ROUND 9

Thursday, April 28

Rabbitohs v Tigers at ANZ Stadium, 7.50pm

Friday, April 29

Eels v Bulldogs at ANZ Stadium, 7.50pm

Saturday, April 30

Panthers v Raiders at Carrington Park, Bathurst 3pm

Roosters v Knights at Allianz Stadium, 5.30pm

Sea Eagles v Cowboys at Brookvale Oval, 7.30pm

Sunday, May 1

Warriors v Dragons at Mt Smart Stadium, 2pm

Titans v Storm at Cbus Super Stadium, 2pm

Sharks v Broncos at Shark Park, 4pm

ROUND 10

Thursday, May 12

Dragons v Raiders at Jubilee Oval, 7.50pm

Friday, May 13

Eels v Rabbitohs at Pirtek Stadium, 7.50pm

Saturday, May 14

Panthers v Warriors at AMI Stadium, Christchurch 5pm

Storm v Cowboys at Suncorp Stadium, 5.30pm

Sea Eagles v Broncos at Suncorp Stadium, 7.30pm

Sunday, May 15

Knights v Sharks at Hunter Stadium, 2pm

Tigers v Bulldogs at ANZ Stadium, 4pm

Monday, May 16

Titans v Roosters at Cbus Super Stadium, 7pm

ROUND 11

Thursday, May 19

Rabbitohs v Dragons at ANZ Stadium, 7.50pm

Friday, May 20

Cowboys v Broncos at 1300Smiles Stadium, 7.50pm

Saturday, May 21

Tigers v Knights at Campbelltown Stadium, 3pm

Warriors v Raiders at Yarrow Stadium, New Plymouth, 7.30pm

Sharks v Sea Eagles at Shark Park, 7.30pm

Sunday, May 22

Panthers v Titans at Pepper Stadium, 2pm

Bulldogs v Roosters at ANZ Stadium, 4pm

Monday, May 23

Eels v Storm at Pirtek Stadium, 7pm

ROUND 12

Friday, May 27

Broncos v Tigers at Suncorp Stadium, 7.50pm

Saturday, May 28

Dragons v Cowboys at WIN Stadium, 7.30pm

Sunday, May 29

Raiders v Bulldogs at GIO Stadium, 4pm

Monday, May 30

Knights v Eels at Hunter Stadium, 7pm

Byes: Panthers, Rabbitohs, Roosters, Sea Eagles, Sharks, Storm, Titans, Warriors

State of Origin 1 June 1, ANZ Stadium, 8pm

State of Origin 2 June 22, Suncorp Stadium, 8pm

State of Origin 3 July 13, ANZ Stadium, 8pm





ROUND 13

Friday, June 3
Raiders v Sea Eagles at GIO Stadium, 7.50pm
Saturday, June 4
Warriors v Broncos at Mt Smart Stadium, 5pm
Cowboys v Knights at 1300Smiles Stadium, 5.30pm
Storm v Panthers at AAMI Park, 7.30pm

Sunday, June 5
Roosters v Tigers at Allianz Stadium, 4pm
Rabbitohs v Titans at nib Stadium, 4.30pm
Monday, June 6
Bulldogs v Sharks at ANZ Stadium, 7pm
Byes: Dragons, Eels

ROUND 14

Thursday, June 9
Broncos v Raiders at Suncorp Stadium, 7.50pm
Friday, June 10
Tigers v Rabbitohs at ANZ Stadium, 7.50pm
Saturday, June 11
Knights v Warriors at Hunter Stadium, 3pm
Eels v Titans at TIO Stadium, 5.30pm
Roosters v Storm at Allianz Stadium, 7.30pm
Sunday, June 12
Sea Eagles v Panthers at Brookvale Oval, 4pm
Monday, June 13
Dragons v Bulldogs at ANZ Stadium, 4pm
Sharks v Cowboys at Shark Park, 7pm

ROUND 15

Friday, June 17
Rabbitohs v Eels at ANZ Stadium, 7.50pm
Saturday, June 18
Dragons v Storm at WIN Stadium, 7.30pm
Sunday, June 19
Warriors v Roosters at Mt Smart Stadium, 6pm
Monday, June 20
Titans v Sea Eagles at Cbus Super Stadium, 7pm
Byes: Broncos, Bulldogs, Cowboys, Knights, Panthers, Raiders, Sharks, Tlgers

ROUND 16

Friday, June 24
Panthers v Rabbitohs at Pepper Stadium, 7.50pm
Saturday, June 25
Knights v Dragons at Hunter Stadium, 3pm

Sharks v Warriors at Shark Park, 5.30pm
Bulldogs v Broncos at ANZ Stadium, 7.30pm
Sunday, June 26
Titans v Raiders at Cbus Super Stadium, 2pm
Storm v Tigers at AAMI Park, 4pm
Monday, June 27
Cowboys v Sea Eagles at 1300Smiles Stadium, 7pm
Byes: Eels, Roosters

ROUND 17

Thursday, June 30
Roosters v Bulldogs at Allianz Stadium, 7.50pm
Friday, July 1
Broncos v Storm at Suncorp Stadium, 7.50pm
Saturday, July 2
Warriors v Titans at Mt Smart Stadium, 5pm
Tigers v Panthers at ANZ Stadium, 5.30pm
Sharks v Eels at Shark Park, 7.30pm
Sunday, July 3
Raiders v Knights at GIO Stadium, 2pm
Rabbitohs v Cowboys at Barlow Park, Cairns 4pm
Monday, July 4
Sea Eagles v Dragons at Brookvale Oval, 7pm

ROUND 18

Friday, July 8
Eels v Roosters at Pirtek Stadium, 7.50pm
Saturday, July 9
Bulldogs v Tigers at ANZ Stadium, 7.30pm
Sunday, July 10
Panthers v Sharks at Pepper Stadium, 4pm
Monday, July 11
Raiders v Cowboys at GIO Stadium, 7pm
Byes: Broncos, Dragons, Knights, Rabbitohs, Sea Eagles, Storm, Titans, Warriors

ROUND 19

Friday, July 15
Dragons v Titans at Jubilee Oval, 7.50pm
Saturday, July 16
Sea Eagles v Warriors at nib Stadium, 3.30pm
Rabbitohs v Broncos at ANZ Stadium, 7.30pm
Sunday, July 17
Knights v Storm at Hunter Stadium, 2pm
Panthers v Eels at Pepper Stadium, 4pm

Monday, July 18
Roosters v Sharks at Allianz Stadium, 7pm
Byes: Bulldogs, Cowboys, Raiders, Tigers

ROUND 20

Thursday, July 21
Cowboys v Bulldogs at 1300Smiles Stadium, 7.50pm
Friday, July 22
Broncos v Panthers at Suncorp Stadium, 7.50pm
Saturday, July 23
Raiders v Warriors at GIO Stadium, 3pm
Titans v Eels at Cbus Super Stadium, 5.30pm
Storm v Roosters at AAMI Park, 7.30pm
Sunday, July 24
Sharks v Knights at Shark Park, 2pm
Dragons v Tigers at ANZ Stadium, 4pm
Monday, July 25
Rabbitohs v Sea Eagles at ANZ Stadium, 7pm

ROUND 21

July 28-Aug 1
Roosters v Broncos at Allianz Stadium
Bulldogs v Dragons at ANZ Stadium
Titans v Sharks at Cbus Super Stadium
Warriors v Panthers at Mt Smart Stadium
Eels v Tigers at ANZ Stadium
Rabbitohs v Raiders at ANZ Stadium
Sea Eagles v Knights at Brookvale Oval
Cowboys v Storm at 1300Smiles Stadium

ROUND 22

August 4-8
Dragons v Broncos at WIN Stadium
Eels v Sea Eagles at Pirtek Stadium
Sharks v Raiders at Shark Park
Knights v Bulldogs at Hunter Stadium
Storm v Rabbitohs at AAMI Park
Titans v Warriors at Cbus Super Stadium
Tigers v Cowboys at Leichhardt Oval
Panthers v Roosters at Pepper Stadium

ROUND 23

August 11-15
Bulldogs v Sea Eagles at ANZ Stadium
Broncos v Eels at Suncorp Stadium
Tigers v Titans at Campbelltown Stadium
Dragons v Sharks at Jubilee Oval
Knights v Panthers at Hunter Stadium
Roosters v Cowboys at Allianz Stadium
Raiders v Storm at GIO Stadium

ROUND 24

August 18-22
Broncos v Bulldogs at Suncorp Stadium
Roosters v Dragons at Allianz Stadium
Knights v Titans at Hunter Stadium
Cowboys v Warriors at 1300Smiles Stadium
Sea Eagles v Storm at Brookvale Oval
Raiders v Eels at GIO Stadium
Panthers v Tigers at Pepper Stadium
Rabbitohs v Sharks at ANZ Stadium

ROUND 25

August 25-29
Bulldogs v Cowboys at Belmore Sports Ground
Storm v Broncos at AAMI Park
Titans v Panthers at Cbus Super Stadium
Sea Eagles v Raiders at Brookvale Oval
Sharks v Roosters at Shark Park
Warriors v Tigers at Mt Smart Stadium
Knights v Rabbitohs at Hunter Stadium
Eels v Dragons at Pirtek Stadium

ROUND 26

September 1-4
Broncos v Roosters at Suncorp Stadium
Bulldogs v Rabbitohs at ANZ Stadium
Dragons v Knights at Jubilee Oval
Cowboys v Titans at 1300Smiles Stadium
Storm v Sharks at AAMI Park
Tigers v Raiders at Leichhardt Oval
Warriors v Eels at Mt Smart Stadium
Panthers v Sea Eagles at Pepper Stadium

FINAL SERIES Qualifying Semi-Finals September 9-11 Semi-Finals September 16-17 Preliminary Finals September 23-24 Grand Final October 2



2016 PRE-SEASON REPORT CARD



KNIGHTS

HOW'D THEY RECRUIT?

D-

Good as Hodkinson is, he's their only notable buy, and that's no way to get off the bottom of the ladder. The Knights' list remains one of, if not the, weakest in the competition.

The bloke you can't afford to lose

With eight regular first-graders departing the squad that stumbled to the 2015 wooden spoon, Newcastle's hopes rest squarely with their single big-name recruit.

Trent Hodkinson arrives at Hunter Stadium on a three-year, \$1.8 million deal to partner fellow ex-Blue Jarrod Mullen in the halves — and the pair are two of the mere five blokes in the Knights' young roster with more than 100 NRL appearances under their belt (Jeremy Smith, Akuila Uate and Kade Snowden being the others).



By the end of next season you'll know all about...

Hooker **Danny Levi** won seven NRL starts in 2015 and he'll flourish under the guidance of new boss and ex-dummy half Nathan Brown. The 20-year-old Kiwi hails from the growing league nursery of Wellington, like team-mate and boom back-rower Joseph Tapine.



The make-or-break stretch of the Knights' 2016 season

Any three-game stretch looks like Mt Everest to the wooden-spooners but rounds seven to nine could destroy Newcastle heading into the rep weekend break. The NRL has done coach Brown no favours with their early-season draw — the Knights have only three home games and must travel interstate four times in the nine weeks before the rep recess — and their three fixtures before the early-May hiatus are critical. A date with the Broncos at Suncorp, an Anzac Day battle with Manly, then the Roosters on a five-day turnaround is a horror run before a holiday... worse when you consider Newcastle have won only four of their 25 clashes against those sides since 2011.



Who's in, who's out and the 17 men to win you a title

COMING David Bhana (Warriors) Krys Freeman (Norths Devils)
Trent Hodkinson (Bulldogs) Mickey Paea (Hull FC) Will Pearsall (Sea Eagles)

GOING Adam Clydsdale (Raiders) David Fa'alogo (retired) Kurt Gidley (Warrington)
Kerrod Holland (Bulldogs) Chris Houston (Widnes) Clint Newton (retired)
Tyrone Roberts (Titans) Beau Scott (Eels) Honeti Tuha (released)
Carlos Tuimavave (Hull FC)

TOP 17 1. Jake Mamo 2. Nathan Ross 3. Sione Mata'utia 4. Dane Gagai 5. Akuila Uate
6. Jarrod Mullen 7. Trent Hodkinson 8. Kade Snowden 9. Tyler Randell 10. Korbin Sims
11. Joseph Tapine 12. Tariq Sims 13. Jeremy Smith. **Interchange:** 14. Danny Levi
15. Mickey Paea 16. Jack Stockwell 17. Robbie Rochow.

By Tom Smith





Better Nate than never

Nathan Ross did a stint in the mines before cracking first grade aged 27. His middle name should be “Tenacious” **BY TONY ADAMS**

MARK ROSS PLAYED 106 first-grade games for Souths, Penrith and the Gold Coast back in the lawless days of the 1980s and has spent the past 20 years coaching elite youngsters in Queensland. He’s seen thousands of players come and go, but believes not one can match the courage and determination of his son, Nathan.

“He’s an amazing story and I just feel so happy for him,” the fiery former winger says.

“He’s just won his first full-time contract at 27 with the Knights. Most players at that age are winding down their careers – Nate is just starting.”

Ross has had a long, hard journey to finally win a spot on the wing at the top level.

He went from Coogee Wombats in Sydney’s east to Burleigh and Tweed Heads on the Gold Coast, then a stint in France followed by club footy in Newcastle with Lakes and Kurri . . . while working in the mines.

“The time in the mines was tough,” Ross says.

“For three years I was up at 4.30am, did an eight- to 10-hour shift of hard work and then rushed to training.

“It wasn’t ideal and there were times I struggled with it but I was lucky to have a good support network of friends and family who helped me keep the dream alive.

“I could’ve given up on footy because it was a difficult time and it looked like I wasn’t going to make it.

“But I kept chipping away and hoping and it’s all turned out great in the end.

“I’m happy, my family is happy

and the guys I played with are cheering for me . . . Now I’m a full-time footballer for the first time in my life and I can focus on training and recovery.

“I’ve come a long way but I’m still not happy – I’m hungry for more.”

Nicknamed ‘White Lightning’ by opponents because of his speed off the mark, Ross made his long-awaited debut in round 21 last year against the Dragons, celebrating with a try.

“It was probably the greatest day of my life – to finally get there after all I’d been through,” he says.

“I’d had the door slammed in my face so many times, and injuries. I broke my jaw, I broke a leg . . . I believe rugby league gives back to those who put in the hard work and I guess I’m living proof of that.

“I have a long way to go – I know

“For three years I was up at 4.30am, did a shift in the mine and rushed to training”

that – but I have a chance, a foot in the door, and that’s all I can ask.

“I don’t want to be remembered as a guy who just played a handful of games late in the year when other players were out injured.

“I’ve never had anything handed to me and I’m prepared to work hard to become a regular first-grader next season.

“I just love the game and it’s like an addiction to me.”

The Knights have plenty of wingers to choose from for 2016 but according to coach Nathan Brown, Ross is a chance of seeing plenty of NRL action.

“He’s in the mix, for sure,” Brown reckons. “He’s a good kid.”

In a game devoid of personalities, the flanker is a breath of fresh air.

Those who know him reckon his confidence is similar to that of Knights legend Adam MacDougall, right down to his habit of talking to his body parts before games.

Ross – whose dad was also a colourful character back in the day – admits he’s a little “different”.

“I believe in having fun and enjoying myself,” he smiles.

“I do talk about myself in the third person a bit.”

The life of the party at training, he can only remember being left speechless on one occasion.

“(Former Test fullback) Brett Mullins was my boyhood hero,” Ross recalls. “I’d run around the backyard with the ball, yelling ‘And Mullins scores again!’

“He lives in Newcastle now and I met him a while ago . . . I was gobsmacked! For about the first time in my life, I didn’t know what to say.” **NEW**

'This season I'll have no excuses'

Danny Wicks has had to battle more than just rustiness during his feelgood return to rugby league **BY TONY ADAMS**

HE COMPLETED HIS remarkable comeback to the NRL in 2015 after a five-year absence, but Danny Wicks knows it's now time to stand and deliver.

After serving an 18-month stint in jail and four-year WADA suspension for drug-related offences, Wicks made a rousing return to the game with Parramatta, averaging 12 hit-ups and 102 metres per game.

But he believes he took nothing more than "baby steps" last year and has vowed to make a far greater impact in 2016.

"I was in uncharted waters – I don't think anyone's been through what I've been through, sitting out for five years," Wicks explains.

"I was rusty and took time to adjust – and I battled a shoulder injury all season, which made it that much tougher.

"It was that bad that I had almost no strength in it and kept falling off tackles. I couldn't even lift my arm above my head. At the end of the game I couldn't take my jumper off without help. It was frustrating after all that time out of the game, but it was either that or surgery.

"I chose to play on in pain before it finally got to me and I missed the last few games of the season to have surgery. It's on the mend and it'll be 100 per cent by the kick-off. This season I'll have no excuses."

Wicks turned 30 in December, a time when many footballers start to think about retirement.

But because of his unique history, he feels he's in the best shape of his career and that his stint in jail – where he dropped 20kg – will prolong his time in the game.

"I'm 30 but I feel better than I did when I was 20 – not many players can say that," Wicks says.

"Most 30-year-olds have more than 200 games under their belts and the wear and tear starts to show after that many matches. They've been bashing themselves up while I was doing nothing.

"I haven't even played 100 and I'm feeling great.

"After five years where I didn't play, I'm making up for lost time. I'm back in full contact again after getting the shoulder fixed and I'm loving it."

Even though Wicks has found redemption after his life was at rock

bottom, he knows some people will never forgive him for his sins.

"I'd be kidding myself if I thought everyone out there was cheering for me," he admits. "I'm just trying my best to get on with my life.

"This year I'll be the club's ambassador to the Children's Hospital at Westmead, which is a real honour.

"We had some anxious times with my son Clay before he was born and anything I can do to help sick kids and their families, I'll be glad to do."

Wicks has copped a hammering on social media but the keyboard warriors have been wasting their time.

"I'm flat out even turning a computer on," he grins. "So I'm not into all that Facebook and Twitter stuff . . . it all goes over my head.

"There were times I thought to myself it (returning to footy) wouldn't happen, so it's just great to be back.

"It was an itch I had to scratch – I just had to give it a go. Otherwise I would've been that guy sitting at the bar saying 'I wish I could have', and no-one wants to have that always at the back of their mind.

"Last year was great but it was just a stepping stone." **ALW**



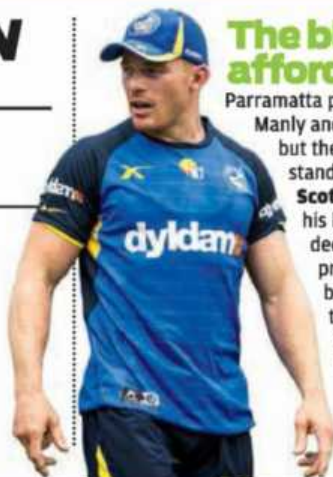
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PARRAMATTA EELS

HOW'D THEY RECRUIT?

A Long-suffering Eels fans have good reason to expect a turnaround in 2016. Parra weren't as bad as their 2015 record suggests, and adding Foran, Scott and Gordon was a great leap forward for the club.



The bloke you can't afford to lose

Parramatta paid big coin to lure Kieran Foran from Manly and he's without doubt the marquee signing, but the man who holds the key to the Eels standing up for themselves in 2016 is **Beau Scott**. He may be 31 and he may have battered his body into submission over the past decade, but Scott remains one of the NRL's premier enforcers. There's potential to burn in the Parra pack and they also boast the experience of Tim Mannah, Anthony Watmough and Danny Wicks, but what they desperately lacked last year was a hard nut who could play big minutes, make big hits and do all the little things in a game that coaches love.

The make-or-break stretch of Parramatta's 2016 season

The first three weeks will tell us much about the Eels as they face last year's grand finalists Brisbane and the Cowboys at Pirtek and then the Doggies at ANZ. But even if they were to lose all three matches there's no need to panic. The Cowboys went 0-3 to kick off 2015 and we all know where they ended up! So the key stretch for Brad Arthur's men is more likely to be between rounds 8-11 when they play the Cowboys away, Bulldogs at ANZ, Rabbitohs at Pirtek and the Storm at Pirtek. And no, that's not a misprint! The boffins at NRL HQ who mull over the draw for months have handed Parra a schedule that pits them against the Cowboys and Bulldogs twice within the first nine rounds. Of course, there's no perfect world when it comes to the draw, and if coach Arthur wants to put a positive spin on this gruelling start then he can point to the fact that 10 of their first 11 games are in Sydney, including six at Pirtek. We'll know by their first bye in round 13 whether the Eels are the real deal.



COMEBACK TRAIL
Danny Wicks (right) and Anthony Watmough are both working their way back to full fitness after injury cut short their 2015 campaigns.



By the end of next season you'll know all about...

With Will Hopoate having joined the Bulldogs, a vacancy has opened up for former Cowboy **Scott Schulte** to show his wares in a backline expected to be less enigmatic and more energised with Kieran Foran at the helm. Schulte played 21 games for the Cowboys Under-20s last year and helped himself to 17 tries. The 20-year-old can slot in comfortably at centre or winger and even the back row, so his versatility could come in very handy for Brad Arthur. At 192cm and 93kg, Schulte is a similar build to fellow recruit Clinton Gutherson and the pair may well find themselves battling it out for a spot on the wing.



Who's in, who's out and the 17 men to win you a title

COMING Mitch Cornish (Raiders) **Kieran Foran** (Sea Eagles) **Michael Gordon** (Sharks) **Clinton Gutherson** (Sea Eagles) **James Hasson** (Sea Eagles) **Cameron King** (Cowboys) **Kieran Moss** (Panthers) **Rory O'Brien** (Dragons) **Scott Schulte** (Cowboys) **Beau Scott** (Knights) **Kelepi Tanginoa** (Cowboys) **Matthew Woods** (Wests Tigers)

GOING Josh Aloiai (Wests Tigers) **Beau Champion** (retired) **Ben Crooks** (Castleford) **Zach Dockar-Clay** (Panthers) **Richie Fa'aoso** (retired) **Fabian Goodall** (Sea Eagles) **Will Hopoate** (Bulldogs) **Darcy Lussick** (Sea Eagles) **Ryan Matterson** (Roosters) **Joseph Paulo** (Sharks) **Reece Robinson** (NSW Waratahs rugby union)

TOP 17 1. Michael Gordon 2. Semi Radradra 3. Brad Takairangi 4. Ryan Morgan 5. Clinton Gutherson 6. Corey Norman 7. Kieran Foran 8. Junior Paulo 9. Nathan Peats 10. Tim Mannah 11. Manu Ma'u 12. Tepai Moeroa 13. Beau Scott.

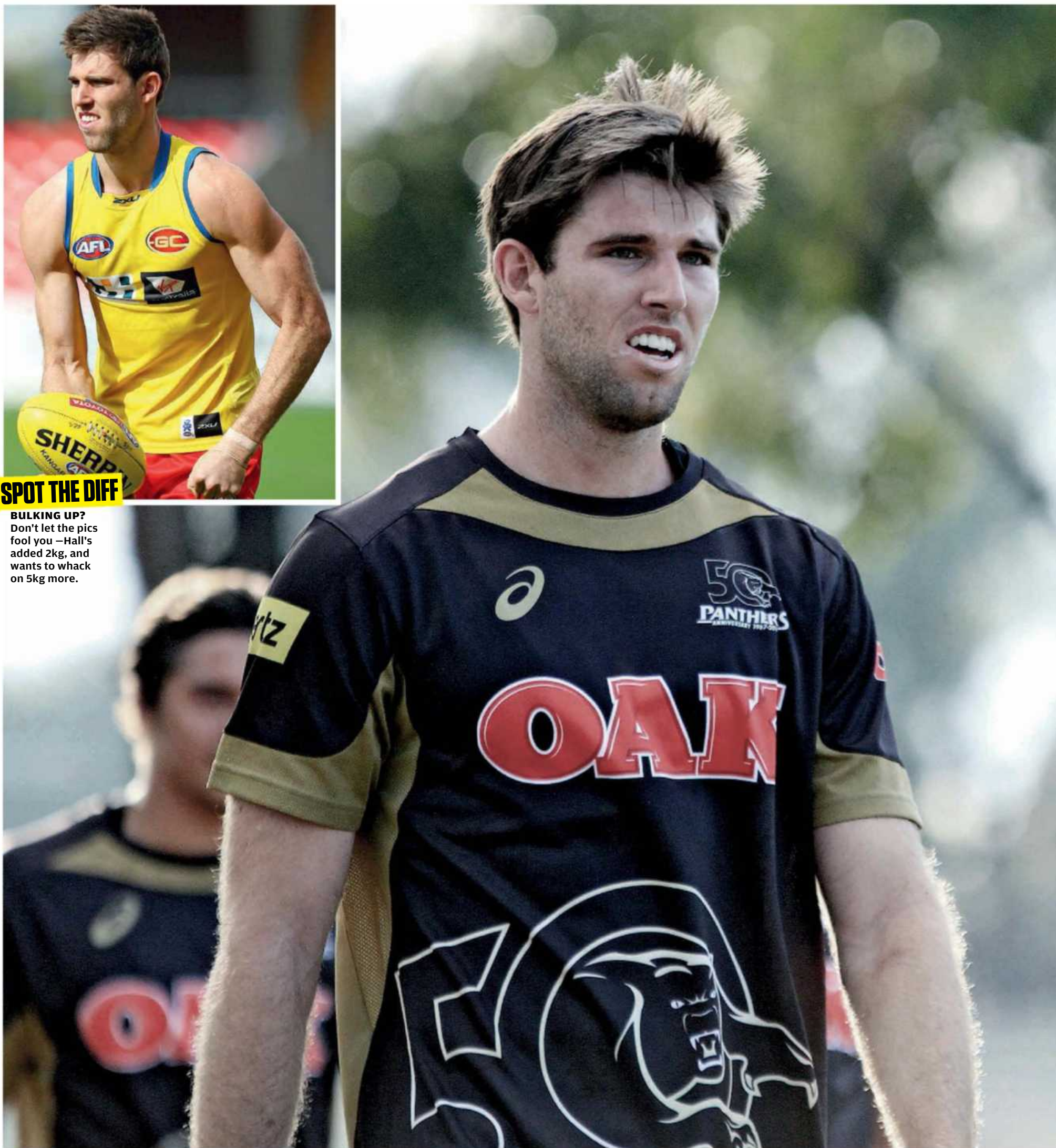
Interchange: 14. Isaac De Gois 15. David Gower 16. Anthony Watmough 17. Danny Wicks.

By Martin Lenehan



SPOT THE DIFF

BULKING UP?
Don't let the pics fool you —Hall's added 2kg, and wants to whack on 5kg more.



AFL convert in for the long Hall

Towering Townsville boy Josh Hall has followed his heart by swapping the Gold Coast Suns for the Golden West **BY TOM SMITH**

JARRYD HAYNE, SONNY Bill Williams, Sam Burgess, Karmichael Hunt, Israel Folau . . . and Josh Hall. His name doesn't carry the same lustre as the other blokes on that long list of sport-swapping superstars but Penrith's 25-year-old AFL convert might well be the nuttiest cross-code experiment of them all.

"It's the flavour of the month," Hall tells *RLW*.

"I guess if you've got the athletic ability and the talent, then other codes will come looking at you.

"It's an honour to be put in the same category as those guys but I just want to play league. I just can't wait to get into the footy."

Panthers fans could be forgiven for expecting a 197cm ruckman more used to tallying hit-outs than hit-ups to have feet for hands, but Hall is no stranger to rugby league.

He started aged eight for the Dysart Bulls before moving to Townsville for high school, playing footy for Kirwan State High and William Ross State High while on soccer and touch football scholarships.

The outside back and Cowboys tragic only gave up the game to pursue the high jump, where he represented Australia and came within 5cm of the qualification mark for the 2012 Olympics.

Hall fell into Aussie Rules by accident while studying exercise physiology at James Cook University, lacing up his touch footy boots to join a mate at a training session with local AFL club Townsville City before catching the eye of Gold Coast Suns scouts.

Only 12 months later, he made the first of his seven AFL appearances

for the Suns from 2012-15 – but he never shook the rugby league bug, continuing to play touch footy throughout his time in the AFL.

A conversation in May with Titans coach Neil Henry set the wheels in motion for a tilt at the NRL and Hall signed a two-year deal with Penrith in September . . . a "good little experiment" according to Panthers supremo Phil Gould.

"I've always been a league at heart," declares the code-hopping nomad, who played with fellow Townsville products Aidan Guerra, Robert Lui and Ray Thompson as a kid. "It's always been a dream to play NRL. If NRL had presented its opportunity back then, I would've taken it with both hands. But I'm really happy with where I've been and what I've accomplished in all the different sports that I've played. I wouldn't trade it for the world.

"It's been a really good journey for me, not being bogged down in one sport. My motto's always been, 'Don't settle where you feel comfortable'. You always want to push yourself to different limits."

"My motto's always been, 'Don't settle where you feel comfortable'. You always want to push yourself"

Hall might be returning home to his native sport but the 197cm wing prospect must bulk up to handle the physicality of rugby league. He's already put on two kilos – from 91 to 93 – thanks to some extra time shifting metal this pre-season, and he wants to reach 95-98kg by March to compete with rival beanpole wingers such as Edrick Lee (197cm, 102kg) and Daniel Tupou (195cm, 99kg).

His next target is winning a spot in Anthony Griffin's Auckland Nines squad, where Hall's aerial skills and aerobic capacity will shine.

"If I can get over to the Nines and showcase my skills over there, that would be ideal. The extra running and more open game would suit me," he says.

"Being tall and coming from an AFL background, those high kicks coming across the field, hopefully I can make that into my specialty.

"I know how to play the game – it's not like I'm coming from no rugby league experience at all.

"The speed and the physical contact will be a lot more but I know I can play, I just need to get used to the game again."

Hall is toiling hard in Penrith's part-time squad just to compete for a place in the Panthers' NSW Cup side for round one. But if he can become the first AFL convert to break into the NRL – like ex-Suns team-mate Karmichael Hunt was the other way – the 25-year-old sporting gypsy will become one hell of a trailblazer.

"It would be a massive achievement to be the first person to do it," Hall says. "If I can play at least one NRL game in 2016, I'll be ecstatic. That's my goal." **RLW**

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PANTHERS

HOW'D THEY RECRUIT?

C Forget five-year plans, 'Hook' Griffin needs a foolproof five-week plan to combat a horror start to his new gig. Merrin and Hiku will be handy but the goodbyes far outweigh the good buys.

The bloke you can't afford to lose

Injuries savaged Penrith like no other club in 2015 but the loss of one bloke in particular crippled their fortunes. **Matty Moylan** was airborne heading into the Panthers' local derby with Parramatta in round 12 – the gun No.1 topped the Dally M leader board with 13 votes – until shocking luck struck the black cats. Penrith's tenuous hold on a top-eight spot vanished the moment Moylan snapped the ligaments in his right ankle, crashing to 10 losses and only four victories in the absence of their trump card.



The make-or-break stretch of Penrith's 2016 season

The Chocolate Soldiers have melted in the March heat in recent years, but they need a cool start to 2016 under new coach Anthony Griffin. A season-opening clash in Canberra before back-to-back home games against heavyweights Canterbury and Brisbane will demand standout efforts from the traditionally slow starters – Penrith have won less than 40 per cent of their March matches since 2010, and haven't won more than two of their opening four fixtures since 2006. If the Panthers pinch the chocolates in their round four clash with St George Illawarra on Easter Sunday – and finish off their opening month with an elusive clean bill of health – then their Easter treats will taste extra sweet.

By the end of the season you'll know all about...

Your grandad's old, beat-up Torana breaks down less often than the bodies of Penrith's 30-plus playmakers Jamie Soward and Peter Wallace . . . meaning 20-year-old recruit

Te Maire Martin could see plenty of first grade in 2016. The quick-stepping Kiwi prodigy joins Penrith from the Wests Tigers on a three-year deal.



Who's in, who's out and the 17 men to win you a title

COMING Sitaleki Akauola (Wests Tigers) Zach Dockar-Clay (Eels) Benjamin Garcia (Catalans) Josh Hall (Gold Coast Suns AFL) Peta Hiku (Sea Eagles) Andrew Heffernan (Raiders) Villame Kikau (Cowboys) Te Maire Martin (Wests Tigers) Suaia Matagi (Roosters) Trent Merrin (Dragons)

GOING Sam Anderson (Redcliffe) Lewis Brown (Sea Eagles) Adam Docker (retired) Daniel Foster (Easts Tigers) Jamal Idris (released) Isaac John (Sea Eagles) Brent Kite (retired) Api Koroisau (Sea Eagles) Sika Manu (Hull FC) Kieran Moss (Eels) Ben Murdoch-Masila (Salford) Nigel Plum (retired) David Simmons (retired) Shaun Spence (retired)

TOP 17 1. Matt Moylan 2. Dallin Watene-Zelezniak 3. Dean Whare 4. Peta Hiku 5. Josh Mansour 6. Jamie Soward 7. Peter Wallace 8. Sam McKendry 9. James Segeyaro 10. Reagan Campbell-Gillard 11. Bryce Cartwright 12. Elijah Taylor 13. Trent Merrin. Interchange: 14. Tyrone Peachey 15. Jeremy Latimore 16. Isaah Yeo 17. Suaia Matagi.

By Tom Smith



SHARKS

HOW'D THEY RECRUIT?

B

James Maloney arrives to complement a line-up which played great footy in 2015. If he can lead the Sharks to the Promised Land, Maloney certainly won't be BBQing alone come the October long weekend!

The bloke you can't afford to lose

Every top team needs a top fullback and that means untried custodian **Jack Bird** needs to soar in the No.1 jumper. Cronulla's recruitment of James Maloney and Chad Townsend to fill the halves spots has re-shuffled Bird to the back – and the 2015 Dally M rookie of the year has no time for second-year syndrome as he moves into such a key post.



By the end of the season you'll know all about...

Pacy outside back **Jordan Drew** hasn't been sighted since scoring on NRL debut for Brisbane in 2013 so the 20-year-old Junior Kangaroo will be hungry to make his mark at Shark Park. Named at centre in the 2015 NYC team of the year, Drew joins Cronulla on a two-year deal.



The make-or-break stretch of Cronulla's 2016 season

Cronulla historically struggle post-Origin – they won just a quarter of games played after Origin Three in the 10 seasons before last year. But in 2015, seven wins and two losses in the rounds following the interstate decider catapulted the Sharks from 10th to within an ace of a top-four berth... and they'll be hoping for a similar run in 2016. Shane Flanagan's men begin life after Origin with a tough clash away to the Roosters before three winnable games against the Knights, Titans and Raiders – two of them at home – in rounds 20-22. Six points there would give the Sharks a stack of momentum heading into their brutal charge towards September, where they meet 2015 finalists the Dragons, Rabbitohs, Roosters and Storm.



Who's in, who's out and the 17 men to win you a title

COMING Kurt Capewell (Ipswich) Josh Cleeland (Ipswich) Jordan Drew (Broncos) James Maloney (Roosters) Matt McIlwrick (Roosters) Joseph Paulo (Eels) Jesse Sene-Lefao (Sea Eagles) Chad Townsend (Warriors)

GOING Josh Addo-Carr (Wests Tigers) Tinirau Arona (Wakefield) Blake Ayshford (Warriors) Nathan Gardner (released) Michael Gordon (Eels) Saulala Houma (released) Todd Murphy (Norths Devils) Pat Politoni (released) Jeff Robson (Warriors) Sami Sauluma (Burlington) Curtis Scott (Storm) Kyle Stanley (retired) Anthony Tupou (Wakefield) Dallas Wells (Norths Devils)

TOP 17 1. Jack Bird 2. Sosaia Feki 3. Gerard Beale 4. Ricky Leutele 5. Valentine Holmes 6. James Maloney 7. Chad Townsend 8. Chris Heighington 9. Michael Ennis 10. Andrew Fifita 11. Luke Lewis 12. Wade Graham 13. Paul Gallen (c). Interchange: 14. Ben Barba 15. Jesse Sene-Lefao 16. Jayson Bukuya 17. Sam Tagataese.

By Tom Smith





Whack of all trades

By night, Jesse Sene-Lefao's one bouncer you don't want to mess with.
By day he's bouncing opposition forwards **BY TOM SMITH**

JESSE SENE-LEFAO ISN'T afraid of a dud shift. The 26-year-old is one of the few full-time NRL players who also works a *proper* job . . . and it's no cushy gig.

Every Friday night after slogging it out at Sharks pre-season training, Sene-Lefao dashes from Shark Park to Penrith Bowling Club for a security shift until the wee hours. A few hours' shuteye on Joseph Paulo's couch and it's back to the Shire for an early-morning training session . . . before working the door at the bowlo until 3am that Saturday night.

On the field, Sene-Lefao's work as a bench specialist is no more enviable. No kid grows up dreaming of one day donning the No.14 but that's exactly the job the blockbusting back-rower was tossed in every single one of his 38 first-grade matches at Manly.

Another three games off the pine for new club Cronulla and he'll claim an unwanted record off Ben Hannant: the most consecutive interchange appearances to start an NRL career. But the Samoan international is happy with the bench shift . . .

"Yeah, and getting named in first grade, I like that too!" Sene-Lefao laughs.

"Hey man, I'm all about playing first grade and doing what's best for the team, so that record doesn't really matter to me. If you're in the 17, that's great.

"Sometimes the bench lifts the team and they end up coming home with the win thanks to the guys off the bench. Hopefully I can come off the bench and do that for the Sharkies."

After riding the Brookvale Oval pine for three seasons, Sene-Lefao joins Cronulla on a two-year deal in 2016. The Penrith junior joins fellow Panthers products Luke Lewis, Joseph Paulo, the Fifita twins and

Wade Graham – a team-mate in the 2007 SG Ball grand final – in the fierce Cronulla pack.

The expert bench-man enjoyed a break-out 2014, missing only one match on Manly's run to the top four, but struggled for form and fitness in 2015, missing three months of footy with a fractured shoulder blade amid a turbulent overhaul of the Sea Eagles' roster.

Sene-Lefao was contracted for 2016 but asked new coach Trent Barrett for a release when Cronulla tabled an offer in October.

"A lot of players were leaving

"Sometimes they say change is good . . . it's been good for me, anyway"



and it felt like Manly wasn't Manly anymore, because there was a lot of change," he says, admitting the leaked list of 14 unwanted players destroyed morale at Brookvale last year.

"I'd probably be lying if I said no. It had a massive impact on the way our season went. But obviously the club has a big plan ahead of itself and they've made some changes and it's probably for the better.

"I mean, I still loved the club at Manly but they're going through a big change. Sometimes they say change is good. It's been good for me, anyway."

A change of team hasn't been the only highlight of Sene-Lefao's jam-packed summer.

His wife Estelle welcomed a third child, Ariella, into the world to join daughter Kahmani (6) and son J Jay Vasa (3) . . . weeks before Jesse worked security at his first-ever concert – Robbie Williams in front of 20,000 fans at Allphones Arena.

"It was a massive experience going to a concert for work but now I want to go to one when I'm not working," Sene-Lefao smiles.

"A few Sharks fans recognised me – I was taking photos with them when they were lining up. It was cool. I try and deny it at first but then they get their phone and they Google you and they show you photos and it's hard to deny it!"

An NRL star working a second job is a novelty in the professional era but the Glenmore Park resident has hungry mouths to feed.

"When you have three kids, mate, you can never have enough . . . man, you need some pocket money!" jokes the doting dad.

"I want to better my future for my kids and my family. If I work hard now I can take it easy when I'm old."

For the time being, Sene-Lefao is content tackling those dud shifts – on and off the field. **RLW**

“If they’re expecting the same thing as Issac, that’s their expectation, not mine”



BUNNY BROTHERS
Mario Fenech has been a fan of McInnes (right) since he was in the Under-20s.

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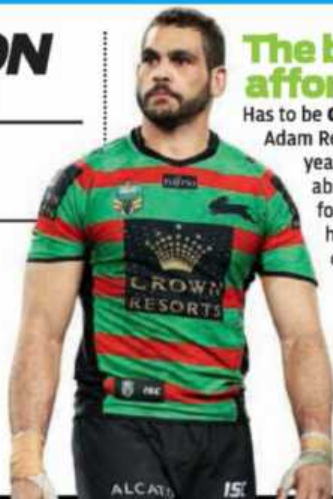


RABBITOHS

HOW'D THEY RECRUIT?

B-

Sam Burgess returns. For most other teams that'd mean an A+ here, but the loss of Issac Luke hurts, and they've still not replaced the aggro of Ben Te'o after 2014.



The bloke you can't afford to lose

Has to be **Greg Inglis**, despite the club's struggles when Adam Reynolds was out for a good stretch of last year. You could put Batman at fullback in GI's absence and the team would still be worse off for it; the bloke is just *that* good. Whether he's hammering out extra metres through traffic on kick returns, burning defenders on stellar tries or making last-ditch tackles, no other Souths player can match his impact on games. That job will fall to Alex Johnston if Inglis is out, as it did last year. While the former Kangaroo has pace and attacking prowess in spades, he's nowhere near GI's equal. Then again, only a handful of players in the world are.

The make-or-break stretch of Souths' 2016 season

Michael Maguire's men have a horror run in late March all the way through April, facing the Dogs, Sea Eagles, Roosters, Cowboys and Broncos in consecutive weeks. But given the way their terrible finish to last year's regular-season games left them limping into the finals, rounds 17, 19 and 20 will be even more important to their title chances. Here the Bunnies have a great chance to score three straight wins against top opposition, starting with an away game against the Cowboys. The Redfern lads' second bye comes at an ideal time the following week, then they're home against the Broncos just three days after a fair few of them play Origin. Manly at home is next. Snag all three and they'll be building excellent momentum not far out from the finals.



Cameron McInnes' mission impossible

Becoming the new Issac Luke isn't achievable, so Souths' new hooker plans to be his own man **BY SHAYNE BUGDEN**

WHEN ISSAC LUKE departed Souths he left a hole in the pack roughly the size of the budget deficit. Filling it is a mountain of a job; it's hard to think of another player anywhere in the world who can duplicate his trademark road-grading runs out of dummy half and back them up with defence that'd keep Clive Palmer away from a free seafood buffet.

So Cameron McInnes isn't going to try.

Asked if Bunnies diehards have been telling him he's got big shoes to fill, the 21-year-old rake replies, "Some people might throw the comment out there but I don't really take much notice of it.

"Even though Issac was a big help for me, I'm quite a different player to him. So if they're expecting the same thing, well, that's their expectation, not mine."

What McInnes is expecting to do is lock up the No.9 jumper for 2016, and a big part of that is improving one particular facet of his play: taking command and steering the side around the park.

"Being that more dominant player in the middle of the field there, hooker's one of the most important positions now, so really taking control of the game is something I'm looking to do," he tells *RLW*.

"It's everything – how I talk and also how I handle the action."

McInnes says he's been working closely on his technique with

assistant coach Wayne Collins – who hooked for St George in two grand finals – and former Bunnies and Eels playmaker David Penna, who's the club's new NYC coach.

But another newcomer to Redfern could have an even bigger role to play in making him step up his game, and that's Damien Cook.

He filled in superbly for injured Bulldogs No.9 Michael Lichaa over the last five rounds of 2015, and got a two-year contract after turning heads at Souths. One of those heads belongs to McInnes.

"I played against him twice last year, once in reserve grade and at the end of the year in first grade for the Dogs, and he played really well in that game," he says of Cook.

"He's been real good at training, having him around. He's a great bloke and he's real quick out of dummy half, so he's definitely brought a lot to the squad already."

Asked if he felt extra pressure when Cook's signing was announced soon after he and the rest of the Souths forward pack failed to fire heading into the finals, McInnes takes about a millisecond to reply, "No, not at all.

"I don't feel any pressure because there's been Nathan Peats, Api (Koroisau) and Issac in front of me and I've learned a lot from all of them and had to compete with them, but it's made me a better player.

"Having another good player there in Damien is only going to help me improve."

All fans hate to see talented juniors leave the club, so Dylan Walker's departure is a body blow to the faithful. But they can console themselves with the fact that McInnes is about as Souths as Reggie Rabbit and bears some striking similarities to club legend Mario Fenech.

As well as playing the same position, they went to the same school, Pagewood Marist, located smack-bang in Rabbits territory in Maroubra. So it's no wonder Fenech has had a special interest in McInnes for about four years, and keeps an eye out for him on his visits to Redfern.

"Mario's around the club a fair bit and he'll always stop and have a chat, see how I'm going and give me a bit of motivation," the young rake explains. "I love having Souths people around the club who are born and bred in the area."

After watching him since he was in the Under-20s, 'Muzza' has big raps on McInnes.

"The kid can play. He's got great agility, he's pretty quick, great eye-hand coordination, and he can catch and pass the ball very well," says Fenech, who reckons all those attributes mean the Souths junior could be spoken about for City selection this year.

Sounds great, but talk to McInnes and he'll tell you his focus is squarely on the cardinal and myrtle and helping them "get back to the team that we know we can be". **RLW**

By the end of next season you'll know all about...

Cameron McInnes looks set to get the first shot at filling the massive hole left by departed rake Issac Luke, but **Damien Cook** should be good enough to push him hard for playing time. The Bunnies must've been rapt when they landed the 24-year-old from Canterbury.

He's got outstanding pace over the first 10-15 metres, like a younger Jamie Soward, and scored four tries in the Dogs' final five games last year. He averaged almost 50 tackles a game in that time, too, and didn't miss many.

Who's in, who's out and the 17 men to win you a title

COMING Sam Burgess (English rugby) **Damien Cook** (Bulldogs) **Hymel Hunt** (Storm) **Michael Oldfield** (Catalans)

GOING Ben Lowe (retired) **Issac Luke** (Warriors) **Chris McQueen** (Titans) **Sam Manuleleua** (released) **Daryl Millard** (released) **Darren Nicholls** (Broncos) **Joel Reddy** (released) **Glenn Stewart** (Catalans) **Setefano Taukafa** (released) **Dylan Walker** (Sea Eagles) **Tim Grant** (Tigers)

TOP 17 1. Greg Inglis (c) 2. Alex Johnston 3. Kirisome Auva'a 4. Bryson Goodwin 5. Aaron Gray 6. Luke Keary 7. Adam Reynolds 8. George Burgess 9. Cameron McInnes 10. Dave Tyrrell 11. Jason Clark 12. John Sutton 13. Sam Burgess

Interchange: 14. Kyle Turner 15. Damien Cook 16. Tom Burgess 17. Chris Grevsmuhl

By Shayne Bugden





DRAGONS

HOW'D THEY RECRUIT?

B-

They may have missed out on James Roberts but former Dog Tim Lafai has potential to burn in the centres, while Kurt Mann and Mose Masoe will be more than handy acquisitions for Paul McGregor.

The bloke you can't afford to lose

Gareth Widdop calls the shots, kicks the goals, cajoles the forwards and keeps a cool head when Benji's antics get frantic. The silky Pom scored nine tries and laid on 15 more for his teammates in a stellar 2015 which ended in despair against the Dogs. Sure, Josh Dugan is a freak who can blow a game apart but Widdop is the glue that keeps it all together.



By the end of the season you'll know all about...

Taane Milne has represented the Junior Kiwis in league and Australian Schoolboys in rugby. The 20-year-old can play centre or wing and the Dragons have high hopes for the former Rooster, who has the size and strength to cut it in the NRL.



The make-or-break stretch of the Dragons' 2016 season

The Red V will need to be switched on early with a round-one trip to Melbourne followed by the Sharks away and the Bunnies at the SCG. Undoubtedly a tough start but at least in the opening three rounds you have all your troops on deck and everyone is pumped up to make an impression. Where things get really tough is late July into August when No.1 gun Josh Dugan will be battling Origin fatigue and the inevitable wear and tear is taking its toll. So the four-game stretch against the Dogs, Broncos, Sharks and Roosters between rounds 21 and 24 looms as the deciding factor in whether the Dragons sneak into the eight again or disappear into oblivion.

Who's in, who's out and the 17 men to win you a title

COMING Kalifa Faifai Loa (Titans) Siliva Havili (Warriors) Sebastine Ikahihifo (Warriors) Tim Lafai (Bulldogs) Dunamis Lui (Sea Eagles) Kurt Mann (Storm) Mose Masoe (St Helens) Tyrone McCarthy (Hull KR) Josh McCrone (Raiders) Taane Milne (Roosters) Adam Quinlan (St Helens)

GOING Shannon Crook (released) Craig Garvey (Bulldogs) Nathan Green (Sea Eagles) Dan Hunt (retired) Justin Hunt (Wests Tigers) Mark Ioane (London) Jack Kavanagh (released) Heath L'Estrange (retired) Trent Merrin (Panthers) Eto Nabuli (Old Reds rugby) Rulon Nutira (Redcliffe) Rory O'Brien (Eels) Luke Page (Burligh) George Rose (released) Adam Tuimavave-Gerard (Broncos)

TOP 17 1. Kurt Mann 2. Peter Mata'utia 3. Josh Dugan 4. Tim Lafai 5. Jason Nightingale 6. Gareth Widdop 7. Benji Marshall 8. Leeson Ah Mau 9. Mitch Rein 10. Mike Cooper 11. Tyson Frizell 12. Joel Thompson 13. Jack de Belin. Interchange: 14. Josh McCrone 15. Ben Creagh 16. Dunamis Lui 17. Mose Masoe.

By Martin Lenehan

130kg of old-school grunt

Mose Masoe is ditching the fancy stuff so he can eat metres and bash ball-runners for the Dragons **BY TIM KEEBLE**

A SUCCESSFUL two-year stint in the Super League has provided Mose Masoe with a truckload of incentive to make the most of his second tour of duty in the NRL – plus he's come back with a couple of new tricks up his sleeve.

One of a host of new faces at St George Illawarra for 2016, Masoe signed a two-year deal in June after two seasons with St Helens.

The former Roosters and Panthers prop is ecstatic to be back in the world's toughest football competition after occasionally wondering if he'd ever return.

"It's kind of like a second lifeline coming back to the NRL," Masoe says. "I never knew that I'd get this opportunity again, so I'm pretty grateful to be back."

Standing 199cm and weighing 130kg, New Zealand-born Masoe debuted with the Roosters in 2010 and was shuffled in and out of first grade for three years.

He had 17 games for Penrith in 2013 before joining Nathan Brown's St Helens and playing a key role in the Saints' 14-6 victory in the 2014 Super League grand final.

Masoe proudly represented Samoa at the 2013 World Cup and 2014 Four Nations, catching the eye of Dragons scouts. Now the 26-year-old father of three says he has some new weapons to help him cement a regular spot in Paul McGregor's 17-man squad.

"I feel like I've matured as a player. I've picked up a lot of tricks of the trade in England because it's all attack-based," he says.

"I've picked up a couple of

little things to add to my game, especially being under (St Helens coach and former Great Britain hooker) Keiron Cunningham. He really helped out with some little tricks to get around the field, little plays you can do as a front-rower to better your game.

"For me it was just about the mentality as a front-rower, being more ruthless with the carries. It's kind of like back in the old-school days, watching guys like Jason Ryles. They just carry the ball strong and that's their job, and it kind of took me back to that – that's my job, I have to do this to beat him or he's going to beat me.

"I tried to do a bit of ball-playing and I thought 'That's not my strength'. I'm sticking to my strengths and for me that's running hard and tackling hard, week in, week out."

"I've matured as a player. I've picked up a lot of tricks of the trade"

Masoe relishes his role as an enforcer at prop and doesn't expect to be called upon to fill the vacancy in the back row as former Dragons and NSW lock Trent Merrin's successor.

"I just really want to establish myself as a genuine front-rower," he says.

"It depends on how 'Mary' wants to use me and what he thinks is best for the team – coming off the bench and being explosive or playing minutes.

"The training we're doing now really caters for both those roles. It's been good. We've been doing a lot of running and . . . a lot more running."

Despite the loss of Merrin, the Dragons pack has more depth and is more experienced than last season.

"Making that first 17 regularly would be my goal for this year, and it's going to be a big challenge because there's a lot of young boys that train hard, and they're coming back stronger and faster," Masoe reckons.

It didn't take the hulking bookend long to discover McGregor is hard but fair.

"He's pretty straight-up and that's what I like about a coach. He tells you what he wants and he basically just wants people to work hard day in day out," Masoe says.

"If he sees you slacking, he's on your back, so it's good.

"He's a people person, too. He cares about the family and knows about your kids, and he can relate to you because he's very down to earth.

"He's a mentor as well as a coach."



The ones that got away

Jayden Nikorima is hoping for a happier ending than the last kid who swapped the Broncos for Bondi **BY PHIL MITCHELL**

WAYNE BENNETT loses a young player he wants to keep about as often as his beloved Maroons lose an Origin series nowadays.

Justin Hodges is one of the biggest names to have checked out of Wayne's World – though he eventually returned anyway and achieved legendary status at the Broncos.

Jayden Nikorima is another rare one who got away. The teenage utility has done a Hodgo by turning his back on Brisbane to sign a three-year deal with the Roosters, where he's expected to break into the NRL in 2016.

Nabbing Nikorima – who plays fullback, centre, five-eighth, halfback or hooker – is quite a coup for the Tricolours. Insiders say the club had to shell out almost \$750,000 to beat Brisbane and Melbourne for his prized signature.

Given that Nikorima is the first Broncos prodigy the Roosters have poached from Red Hill since Hodges in 2002, the bragging rights alone will be worth that much if the 19-year-old ends up even half as good as the champion centre.

Like a youthful Hodges, the younger brother of boom Bronco and freshly capped Kiwi Kodi has a wicked sidestep and is quick. *Bloody quick.*

"He's one of the fastest players I've seen," Broncos Under-20s coach Craig Hodges said last year. "You

can't coach speed in this game and he has it in spades. It's a shame to lose Jayden, he's a great talent."

Nikorima is as versatile as they come – "I'm not sure if even Jayden knows what his best position is," said Craig Hodges – but his former junior coach and current North Devils CEO Jamie Dowse is willing to take a stab.

"I don't like to tell Robbo (Trent Robinson) where to put him or whatever," laughs Dowse, who helped groom both Nikorimas for the big time when he headed up the Northern Broncos coaching and development program. "But I probably see him as a (hooker), similar to Kodi.

"Like Kodi, he's not really an organiser – he's more of a play-what's-in-front-of-you sort of player.

"I reckon he'll be a sensation coming off the bench, especially with the interchange coming down to eight.

"He's got NRL written all over him."

New Zealand-born but Brisbane-raised, Nikorima is too young to recall the proverbial that hit the fan at the Broncos when Hodges announced he was leaving the club, but Jayden's Brisbane team-mates were only too happy to give him a history lesson.

"When I signed with the Roosters the boys were saying Wayne should drop me like he did with Hodgo," the well-spoken teenager laughs. "But it was all in good fun – I was in the rehab squad anyway and out for the rest of the season so he couldn't drop me."

All jokes aside, Hodges enjoyed plenty of success during his stormy stint at the Roosters, winning a grand final, a World Club Challenge and earning the first of 24 Maroon jerseys. He's one hard act to follow.

But for now Nikorima's goals are much more modest.

"I just want to make my (first-grade) debut and get through a full season, because the last two I haven't," he tells *RLW*. "Last season I did my shoulder in the Under-20s Origin game and had to have a reconstruction, and the year before I subluxed my knee and had ankle syndesmosis in 2014.

"I don't really care what position I play, but five-eighth is probably my favourite."

Interestingly, Nikorima happens to be living under the same roof as the bloke he'll be competing with for the No.6 jersey, Jackson Hastings.

"He's a pretty good mate who I've known for a few years through junior rep teams like Australian Schoolboys and Junior Kangaroos," Nikorima says. "We're living in Botany, which is a bit like Brisbane, and it's only 10 minutes away from the beach too, which is great."

So no signs of the homesickness that forced Hodges to hightail it back to Brisbane after 2004?

"I'm actually finding living in Sydney surprisingly really good – I'm glad I made the move." *RLW*

"The boys were saying Wayne should drop me like he did with Hodgo"

2016 PRE-SEASON REPORT CARD



SYDNEY ROOSTERS

HOW'D THEY RECRUIT?

C+

Will need some of their young-gun recruits to step up big time to help fill the huge void left by Roger Tuivasa-Sheck and James Maloney. Over to you, Jayden Nikorima and Joe Burgess!



The bloke you can't afford to lose

It's bad enough the Roosters could be missing **Jared Waerea-Hargreaves** in the early rounds as he recovers from a knee reconstruction. But if the fearsome front-rower goes down again in 2016 then recent history suggests the club's title hopes will be in tatters. With JWH in career-best form last year, the Roosters looked set to win their second comp in three seasons. Then disaster struck three weeks before the finals when the big Kiwi did his ACL and Mitchell Pearce tore his hamstring. While the Roosters didn't miss a beat for the rest of the regular season without the pair, JWH's absence in particular hurt the club in a huge way during the finals. Roosters fans will have their fingers crossed he's fit and firing come September.

The make-or-break stretch of the Roosters' 2016 season

Few sides face a tougher run in to the finals than the Roosters as they set their sights on becoming the first team to win four consecutive minor premierships since St George did it almost half a century ago. Their August/September from hell begins with a clash against reigning premiers the Cowboys at Allianz Stadium in round 23 and ends with a final-round trip to Suncorp to face grand finalists Brisbane, the team that knocked them out of last year's premiership race on the same turf. Sandwiched in between are matches against another two top-eight sides from 2015, the Dragons (home) in round 24 and the Sharks (away) in round 25. The Cronulla game could be the toughest of the lot. The Sharks have been the Roosters' bogey side in recent seasons. With the signing of former Rooster James Maloney sure to strengthen their halves, the Sharks will be confident of cutting the Chooks down to size again.





By the end of next season you'll know all about...

Three years ago **Vincent Leuluai** was running around in the green and gold with Jackson Hastings and Jayden Nikorima – now the 20-year-old could be teaming up with his former Australian Schoolboys team-mates in the red, white and blue. A powerful ball-runner who can play in the back row or front row and who is off-contract at the end of 2016, Leuluai is highly rated by the Roosters' brains trust. The Minto Cobras junior might have even made his NRL debut last year had he not been injured when a spot was up for grabs, but he still managed to win the Roosters' NYC players' player-of-the-year award despite missing seven matches. With Jared Waerea-Hargreaves set to miss the opening rounds, Leuluai's chance could come as soon as the March 6 grudge match against the Rabbitohs.



Who's in, who's out and the 17 men to win you a title

COMING Paki Afu (Point Chevalier) **Joe Burgess** (Wigan) **Mitchell Frei** (Wynnum Manly) **Ian Henderson** (Catalans) **Ryan Matterson** (Eels) **Jayden Nikorima** (Broncos)

GOING Scott Drinkwater (Storm) **Samisoni Langi** (released) **James Maloney** (Sharks) **Willie Manu** (released) **Suaia Matagi** (Panthers) **Matt McIlwrick** (Sharks) **Taane Milne** (Dragons) **Nathan Stapleton** (London) **Roger Tuivasa-Sheck** (Warriors)

TOP 17 1. **Blake Ferguson** 2. **Daniel Tupou** 3. **Michael Jennings** 4. **Shaun Kenny-Dowall** 5. **Joe Burgess** 6. **Jackson Hastings** 7. **Mitchell Pearce** (c) 8. **Jared Waerea-Hargreaves** 9. **Jake Friend** (c) 10. **Sam Moa** 11. **Boyd Cordner** 12. **Aidan Guerra** 13. **Siosua Taukeiaho** Interchange: 14. **Mitchell Aubusson** 15. **Jayden Nikorima** 16. **Dylan Napa** 17. **Kane Evans**.

By Phil Mitchell

2016 PRE-SEASON REPORT CARD



NEW ZEALAND WARRIORS

HOW'D THEY RECRUIT?

A+

The addition of Issac Luke and Tuivasa-Sheck give the Warriors one of the comp's best spines. Their combo with fellow Kiwi Test star Johnson means they should challenge strongly for a top-four spot.

The bloke you can't afford to lose

Shaun Johnson's 2015 campaign ended on July 24 and the Warriors didn't record another win. Anyone who reckons that's a coincidence needs their head read. Outside of Thurston, it's hard to think of another player whose health is so crucial to his team's fortunes. Tuimoala Lolohea filled in for Johnson and made the Kiwi Test side, and should do so if injury hits the No.7 again. If that happens, NZ could declare a national day of mourning.



By the end of the season you'll know all about...

Charnze Nicoll-Klokstad has the versatility to be great insurance. The Storm's Under-20s back of the year in 2015 can play from the halves through to fullback. We look forward to seeing him run almost as much as we look forward to commentators trying to get his surname right.



The make-or-break stretch of the Warriors' 2016 season

Manly, the Roosters and the Tigers would kill to have the Kiwi team's schedule, and not just because of the complete lack of five-day turnarounds until round 20. The Warriors only have one three-game streak where they play three or more top-flight sides in a row. They'll want to have their new hooker-halves-fullback combination working by round five, when what's easily their toughest run begins: Roosters (away), Manly (home), Bulldogs (Wellington) and Storm (away). There's plenty of time to recover if they score a duck over those weeks, but it'll still send a message that despite their outstanding buys, the Warriors aren't a real premiership threat.



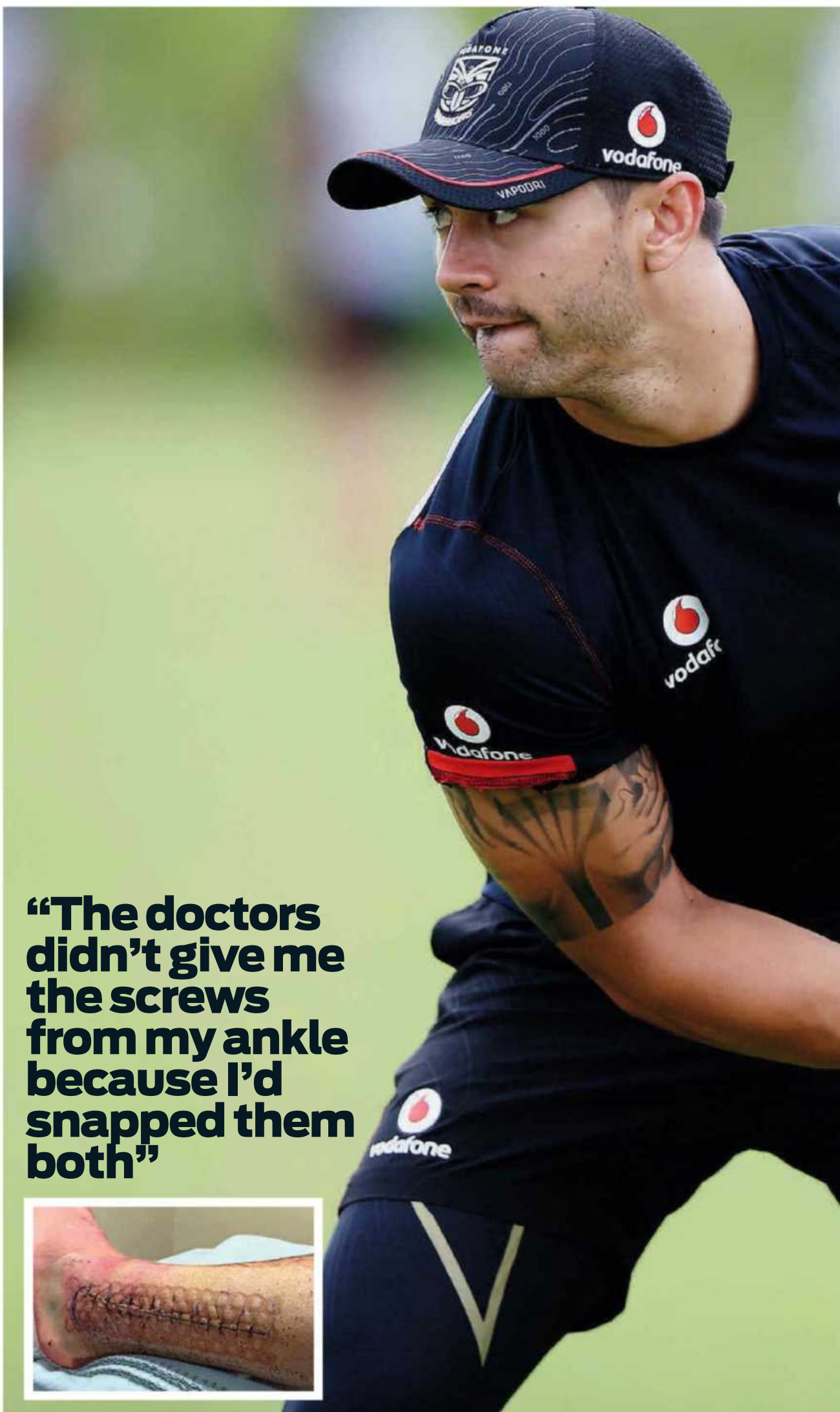
Who's in who's out and the 17 men to win you a title

COMING Blake Ayshford (Sharks) Ali Lauitiiti (Wakefield) Issac Luke (Rabbitohs) Charnze Nicoll-Klokstad (Storm) Jeff Robson (Sharks) Ligi Sao (Sea Eagles) Roger Tuivasa-Sheck (Roosters) Henare Wells (Burlleigh)

GOING Brad Abbey (Bulldogs) David Bhana (Knights) Glen Fisiiahi (Waikato Chiefs rugby) Nathan Friend (Titans) Siliva Havili (Dragons) Sebastine Ikahihifo (Dragons) Ngani Laumape (Wellington Hurricanes rugby) Dominique Peyroux (St Helens) Sam Rapira (Huddersfield) Sam Tomkins (Wigan) Chad Townsend (Sharks)

TOP 17 1. Roger Tuivasa-Sheck 2. Tuimoala Lolohea 3. Konrad Hurrell 4. Solomon Kata 5. Manu Vatuvei 6. Jeff Robson 7. Shaun Johnson 8. Jacob Lillyman 9. Issac Luke 10. Ben Matulino 11. Bodene Thompson 12. Ryan Hoffman 13. Simon Mannering (c). Interchange: 14. Thomas Leuluai 15. Sione Lousi 16. Sam Lisone 17. Albert Vete.

By Shayne Bugden



"The doctors didn't give me the screws from my ankle because I'd snapped them both"





Two screws, a metal plate and a ton of guts

Warriors superstar Shaun Johnson insists his comeback from a shattered ankle will make him a better, tougher player **BY GREG PRICHARD**

SHAUN JOHNSON'S career has been defined by his ridiculous acceleration, outrageous step, freakish passing and a string of unforgettable tries.

Now he's adding mental and physical strength to his list of attributes as he comes back from the most serious injury of his career.

The 25-year-old broke his left ankle and suffered ligament damage last July, and he's getting through his recovery with a combination of positive attitude, fierce determination and some inspiration from one team-mate in particular.

From the moment he posted photos of the 16 stitches in an ugly 20cm scar down the outside of his left leg, which housed a plate and two screws following an operation to repair the damage, Johnson has refused to feel sorry for himself.

He hopes to return to action at the Auckland Nines. Even if that doesn't eventuate, his comeback won't be far away, and insiders at the Warriors say he has impressed everyone with the steel he's shown in his reaction to his first major injury.

"I believe I'll come out of this a better player," Johnson tells *RLW*.

"What I've had to go through, it toughens you up mentally and physically. It's been difficult but I think I've handled it pretty well.

"My love for footy has grown even more. When I get back I'm going

to enjoy every moment of it. This is the first time I've been through something like this, but I've tried to remain positive and looked at it with the mindset that everything happens for a reason and it's about learning and improving and getting the best out of a difficult situation."

The search for inspiration led to Johnson talking to team-mates about how they handled major injury situations.

His biggest inspiration, he says, has been utility Ben Henry, who's making his way back from a second knee reconstruction.

"The positive mindset of the players has rubbed off on me," Johnson says. "Ben is one who stands out. We've rehabbed together, so we've run off each other a bit. I've known him for a while and he's a really good dude, really determined."

The plate is still in Johnson's leg. It may stay there forever. Doctors took the screws out, but although he was keen to get a look at them and see how long they were, he never got the chance. Unusual circumstances put paid to that.

"The screws were big enough to go across the bottom of my leg but they didn't give them to me because I'd snapped them both," Johnson says. "It can happen inside your leg. It's not ideal but they said it's not the first time it's happened and it's just from pressure on the screws.

"I asked for the screws but they said

they had a bit of a problem getting them out so they just ditched them."

The month leading up to the Christmas break was crucial for Johnson as the club upped his training load. His running sessions would last for 30 to 45 minutes and gradually increased in speed and intensity.

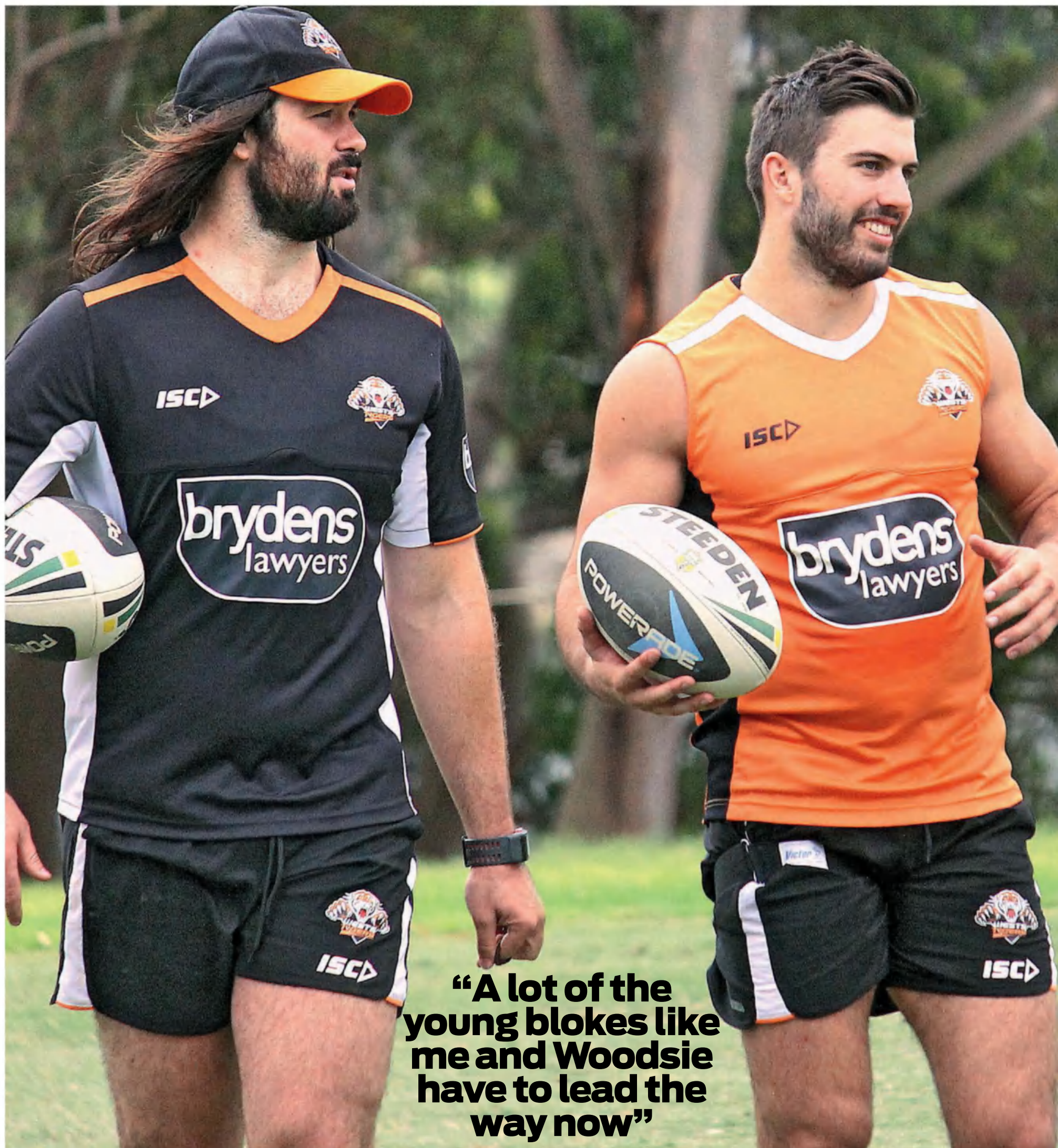
A weights program specific to Johnson's post-surgery needs began with shorter, 15-minute workouts and increased to 30 minutes and beyond. The same gradual build-up applied to workouts on cross-training machines to help with his cardio.

And as he returned to the field with his team-mates, he was gradually given more rein with the agility drills that keep his game sharp. That, he says, is when he began to feel like the real Shaun Johnson again.

Johnson knows the club will be extra cautious and won't let him play in the Nines unless he passes stiff tests in training, but he says that as desperate as he is to get back out there again, he won't do so until he feels confident within himself.

"I don't really care what they give me as benchmarks," he says. "I'm confident of being ready for the Nines, but if, when the time comes, I make those benchmarks and I still don't feel like I'm ready to play, then I won't play.

"I'll know when I'm ready. It'll be soon enough." *RLW*



“A lot of the young blokes like me and Woodsie have to lead the way now”

We've got to grow up some time

After a minor tweak to his troublesome knee, James Tedesco is ready to act like a veteran in 2016 **BY STEVEN RUSSO**

WESTS TIGERS fullback James Tedesco is starting to feel like an old bloke. At 23, he's already had more knee operations than many old-age pensioners, but that's not the only reason the Camden junior is starting to feel like a senior citizen. In a 2015 season dogged by off-field controversy and poor results, Tedesco was a shining light. He played every minute of every game, scored 17 tries and was the club's player of the year – all despite playing with a knee that wasn't 100 per cent.

That said, the fleet-footed custodian insists he could always do more, particularly in the leadership department.

"I'll have to lead from the front a bit now," Tedesco says as he heads into his fifth season of first grade.

"We've lost Keithy Galloway and Patty Richards and they were a couple of the main blokes in our leadership group.

"I have over 50 games' experience, and being a young team there's not many experienced guys left.

"A lot of the young blokes like me, Woodsie (Aaron Woods), Mitch Moses, Brooksie (Luke Brooks) and Sirro (Curtis Sironen) have to lead the way now.

"They always say we've got a young team with juniors coming through, but we've been here for three or four years now."

Tedesco was the Tigers' standout player last year, burning numerous opponents with his blistering pace. Yet remarkably, his knee was still out of whack, and it needed yet another procedure this off-season.

Both he and Woods underwent stem-cell treatment during the break to treat troublesome meniscuses – the cartilage that acts as a shock absorber between the thigh bone and shin bone.

"I was still having a bit of trouble last year with my meniscus . . . there was a bit of pain coming in there at the end," he says.

"Both me and Woodsie had stem cells put in just to provide a bit of protection there. I lost a bit of meniscus because of previous surgeries, so putting some stem cells in there protects that and prevents a bit of the bone-on-bone rubbing.

"This off-season I've been doing

a lot of injury-prevention stuff . . . strengthening the muscles around my knee, like the glutes, the hammies, quads and calves.

"I've still got to monitor it a bit and make sure I'm not going too hard on the leg weights. But it's been really good so far, I haven't felt any pain."

Coach Jason Taylor has been making sure his squad maintains pace of a different kind. In late November he took them 200km up the road for a four-day training camp at the Tomaree National Park near Port Stephens.

Along with the standard field sessions, the squad was also subjected to three timed runs up Mount Tomaree. All 161 metres of it! And with temperatures hovering around the high 30s for the entire camp, Woods tells *RLW* that it was no walk in the (national) park.

"It was hot, man," says Woods, pictured below in camp with his team-mates. "They first day we got up there it was 36 degrees.

"We had a bash-up sesh on the field in the morning and then in the arvo we ripped in again and did some hill runs.

"We were split into groups and while there were times to beat, they didn't stop the clock until the last man in your group finished, so you just had to keep pushing the guy coming last.

"My throat was getting really dry . . . so dry that I couldn't breathe properly."



2016 PRE-SEASON REPORT CARD



WESTS TIGERS

HOW'D THEY RECRUIT?

F Best pick-up Matt Ballin is 32 and coming off major knee surgery. He in no way makes up for losing Richards, Taupau and Galloway. Tigers fans have every right to be very nervous about season 2016.

The bloke you can't afford to lose

Nobody encapsulates the Tiger spirit better than prop **Aaron Woods**. A knockabout bloke with soft hands and a great motor, he's the modern-day incarnation of Balmain legend Steve Roach. Woods provided the Tigers with plenty of go-forward in 2015, averaging almost 150 metres per game. Without him their pack lacks serious punch.



BRONCOS ROUND 12

ROOSTERS ROUND 13

RABBITOHS ROUND 14

By the end of next season you'll know all about...

Young centre **Marion Seve** is definitely one to watch. Insiders rate the 2015 Queensland Under-20s rep as the most outstanding back to come out of rugby league nursery Keebra Park – the same school that produced Benji Marshall!



The make-or-break stretch of Wests Tigers' 2016 season

The black, white and golds will certainly have their work cut for them when they take on a procession of big guns between rounds 12 and 14. First off is 2015 runners-up Brisbane at Suncorp Stadium, and then two local grudge matches against the Roosters and Rabbitohs at Allianz Stadium and ANZ Stadium respectively. The Tigers have an awful record against the Broncos, having only won four of the 24 clashes between the two sides, with their last win coming way back in 2010 at Suncorp. They boast only eight wins from 28 starts against the Roosters, and 11 victories from 26 meetings with Souths. That said, in their most recent clash with the Bunnies in round 14 last year they did win 34-6.

Who's in, who's out and the 17 men to win you a title

COMING Josh Addo-Carr (Sharks) Josh Aloiai (Eels) Matt Ballin (Sea Eagles) Michael Chee-Kam (Sea Eagles) Joel Edwards (Raiders) Rod Griffin (Ipswich) Justin Hunt (Dragons) Jack Littlejohn (Sea Eagles) Billy McConnachie (Ipswich) Jesse Parahi (Sevens rugby) Jordan Rankin (Hull FC) Tim Grant (Rabbitohs)

GOING Sitaleki Akauola (Panthers) Keith Galloway (Leeds) Delouise Hoeter (released) Matthew Lodge (sacked) Joel Luani (released) Keith Lulia (released) Te Maire Martin (Panthers) Tim Moltzen (Sea Eagles) Pat Richards (Catalans) Kurtis Rowe (released) Brenden Santi (released) Martin Taupau (Sea Eagles) Matthew Woods (Eels) Salesi Funaki (Broncos)

TOP 17 1. James Tedesco 2. David Nofoaluma 3. Kevin Naiqama 4. Tim Simona 5. Justin Hunt 6. Mitchell Moses 7. Luke Brooks 8. Aaron Woods 9. Matt Ballin 10. Tim Grant 11. Curtis Sironen 12. Chris Lawrence 13. Joel Edwards. Interchange: 14. Manaia Cherrington 15. Kyle Lovett 16. Ava Seumanufagai 17. Sauaso Sue.

By Steven Russo

Lebanon, USA win their way to the World Cup

Dramas aplenty as Cedars and Hawks earn a ticket to the big time **BY STEVE MASCORD**



CONGRATULATIONS ARE in order for Lebanon and the United States now that they've overcome previous disappointments to qualify for the 2017 World Cup in Australia, New Zealand and PNG.

Both countries have experienced hard-luck stories in recent times when it comes to rugby league's global showpiece.

The Cedars missed out on the 2008 World Cup on points difference and didn't get a start at the 2013 tournament based on one controversial, match-deciding penalty.

For the Tomahawks, now Hawks, the achievement of making the quarter-finals last time around was soured when the RLIF awarded automatic qualification to the top seven countries, pointedly excluding them.

The game in the US was gripped

by a bitter civil war at the time and there was also widespread disapproval among other countries regarding the number of heritage players the American selected, among them Joseph Paulo and Ryan McGoldrick.

The Cedars travelled to Brakpan, located south-east of Johannesburg, for a two-part qualification play-off against South Africa.

But they had to overcome some strife beforehand: the games were originally to be held in Beirut, but recent conflict there forced their relocation to Dubai.

Then the local rugby union arranged for United Arab Emirates Rugby League general manager Sol Mokdad to be arrested, effectively outlawing league unless it's run by the rah-rah in the UAE.

So it was shifted again.

As expected, the Cedars were too

strong in the first game, beating a much-improved Rhinos outfit 40-12. Former Melbourne Storm winger Travis Robinson got a hat-trick.

And the RLWC berth was secured in the return bout with a 50-16 success. Robinson scored another treble, on what captain Chris Saab later described as "the best day of my life."

The Hawks had to overcome Jamaica and Canada to go through and play in Australia, NZ and PNG next year.

Coming off the back of consecutive losses against the Canada Wolverines, the Americans struggled to beat the Reggae Warriors 20-14 in the opening match at Jacksonville, Florida.

"It was a very tough game, a really challenging game," said USA coach Brian McDermott, who took the Leeds to victory in Super League and the Challenge Cup in 2015.

**WORLD CUP
HERE WE COME**
Lebanon (right) cruised through to their first World Cup since 2000 with big wins against South Africa, but USA were forced to do it a lot tougher against Jamaica and Canada.

"The Jamaicans were a group of very big and athletic men that needed to be defended.

"We toughed it out to get the win – I was really pleased with our commitment to each other."

Canada looked set to go out with a whimper a few days later when they trailed Jamaica late on at DeLand, also in Florida, before a scoring blitz from the northerners snatched an 18-all draw.

It all came down to the decider back in Jax, and the new-look Americans were up to the task, defeating the fatigued Canadians 34-24 on a four-day turnaround.

"It was geared for the USA to win," Jamaican player Joe Brown complained to our colleagues at *League Express*.

"They've had an eight-day turnaround. We (Jamaica and Canada) had three days to prepare." **RLW**

International interchange gets chopped

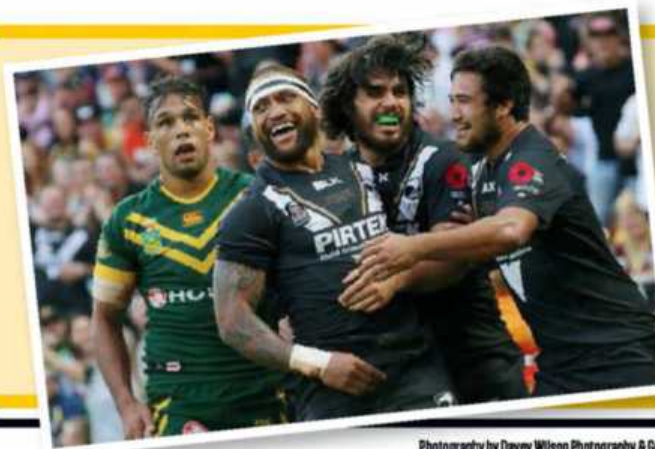
LEAQUE'S WORLD GOVERNING body has confirmed that all games it sanctions will now feature 10 interchanges instead of the previous 12.

Like the NRL's decision to bring replacements down from 10 to eight

for the 2016 season, the Rugby League International Federation's move should help tire forwards and produce more opportunities in attack.

The RLIF also announced a very minor change to eligibility rules,

which will only affect players who were born in a state that no longer exists. Such players can now choose which country they want to represent, as long as that country is one of the "federated entities that constituted that former state".



The other SBW steers Port Macquarie to Clayton Cup glory

Sharks captain-coach Matt Shipway says “everything went right” in near-flawless year

BY TOM SMITH



WHEN THE REAL SONNY Bill Williams lifted the Rugby World Cup at Twickenham last October, the red-headed SBW sat back in Port Macquarie with a trophy that – to him – is every bit as precious.

Matt Shipway (left) earned cult-hero status representing the USA at the 2013 Rugby League World Cup when best mate Joe Cudmore started a Facebook fan page hailing him as the ginger version



of the Kiwi megastar. Shipway and Cudmore teamed up to deliver the Port Macquarie Sharks the 2015 Clayton Cup, giving both Sonny Bills some silverware this off-season.

“Pretty much on par, aren’t they?” chuckles Shipway, thrilled with the prize awarded to the team with the best win-loss record in the CRL each season. “It was one of those years when everything went right. It was unreal.”

Port blitzed the season undefeated until their final-round loss to arch-rivals Wauchope, but had no trouble taking out the grand final against cross-town foes Port City Breakers. The 20-8 triumph secured the Sharks’ ninth title since 1990, and their first since re-entering Group 3 in 2013. Port’s all-but-flawless run also delivered another Clayton Cup to accompany their 2001 CRL crown.

Shipway’s pre-season recruitment of Cudmore and local star Michael Bright, who played

PORT POWER!

The Sharks have their sights set on their first back-to-back premierships since 2000-01.

with Shipway for USARL outfit Boston 13s in 2014, was crucial to the Sharks’ success in 2015.

“Having the three of us added to a side that already had a fair sprinkling of talent,” says Shipway, who adds another title to the 2006 premiership he captained.

“Mate, I was 20 years old (back then), I was the captain, and we won . . . and my 21st was on Mad Monday, so it was a really good year!”

After that title, Shipway moved to Newcastle’s strong Real NRL comp, where he captain-coached Souths into the 2011 semi-finals after a 12-year play-off drought.

He spent the 2014 season spreading the league gospel in the Land of the Free with Boston before returning to his home town last year.

Shipway handed Cudmore the Sharks’ coaching reins for 2016, but the American international isn’t calling time on his well-travelled playing career just yet.

The 2015 title was the side’s first since 2010 – five years is some drought for one of northern NSW’s premier outfits – and Shipway wants to keep his junior club on top while his best mate’s at the helm.

“We’ve both had some pretty good achievements playing footy from a young age to now, and (2015) definitely ranks up there. To come home and get the club to the top again, which from when we were kids is where it’s always been, always well-respected and always high achievers . . . it’s good to get the club back to where it belongs.” 

League puts heart & soul into Mornington Island

Raiders sleep rough and play tough during stirring comeback

BY ROBERT BURGIN

NEXT TIME YOU HEAR A TOURING RUGBY LEAGUE team whinge about accommodation, you might want to show them this picture.

A tarpaulin in the middle of bone-dry field, only a few players lucky enough to have a padded mat, and a didgeridoo for entertainment. It makes a Coogee backpackers look like the Palazzo Versace.

But for the Mornington Island Raiders, this was the platform for arguably their proudest moment in recent times.

After a four-hour boat ride and an even longer bus trip, the Raiders made their return to All Black competition at Normanton last November.

“In the past 12 months we’ve had a handful of games, but the indigenous tournament in Normanton was our ultimate goal,” team coordinator Sean Durant says. “Before 2015 rugby league hadn’t been played properly on Mornington since the early 1990s.”

In their return season, the Gulf of Carpentaria team again benefited from much-appreciated donations from the league community. Training jerseys came from as far as Leigh



OUTDOOR TYPES

The lack of decent digs didn’t dampen the Raiders’ fire at the indigenous tournament in Normanton.



Centurions in northern England, and NSW country clubs such as Wyong Roos and Sawtell Panthers also donated clothes and equipment.

Queensland Health, Drought Relief Funding and the QRL chipped in to make participation possible, but Durant was keen to make sure the team controlled its own destiny.

“The focus was not on someone coming in and doing everything for them . . . or the players waiting for a handout,” he says.

“They sold merchandise and raffle tickets to supporters all around Australia to fund the Normanton trip.”

Mornington Island has endured well-documented social struggles, plus its location makes it particularly vulnerable to cyclones, forcing multiple rebuilds of the settlement.

“Rugby league has put the heart and soul back into the place, but the game is just a small part of it,” says Durant.

“Getting the players off the island is a bigger feat than you may think, given not just travel costs, but issues with probation, parole and management of drugs and alcohol.

“I’m so proud to say that guys have stayed out of prison, improved relationships with their families and obtained employment since league came back into the fold.”

Mornington Island lost all three of their matches in Normanton, but have since played mainland rivals Doomadgee and look forward to brighter things beyond.

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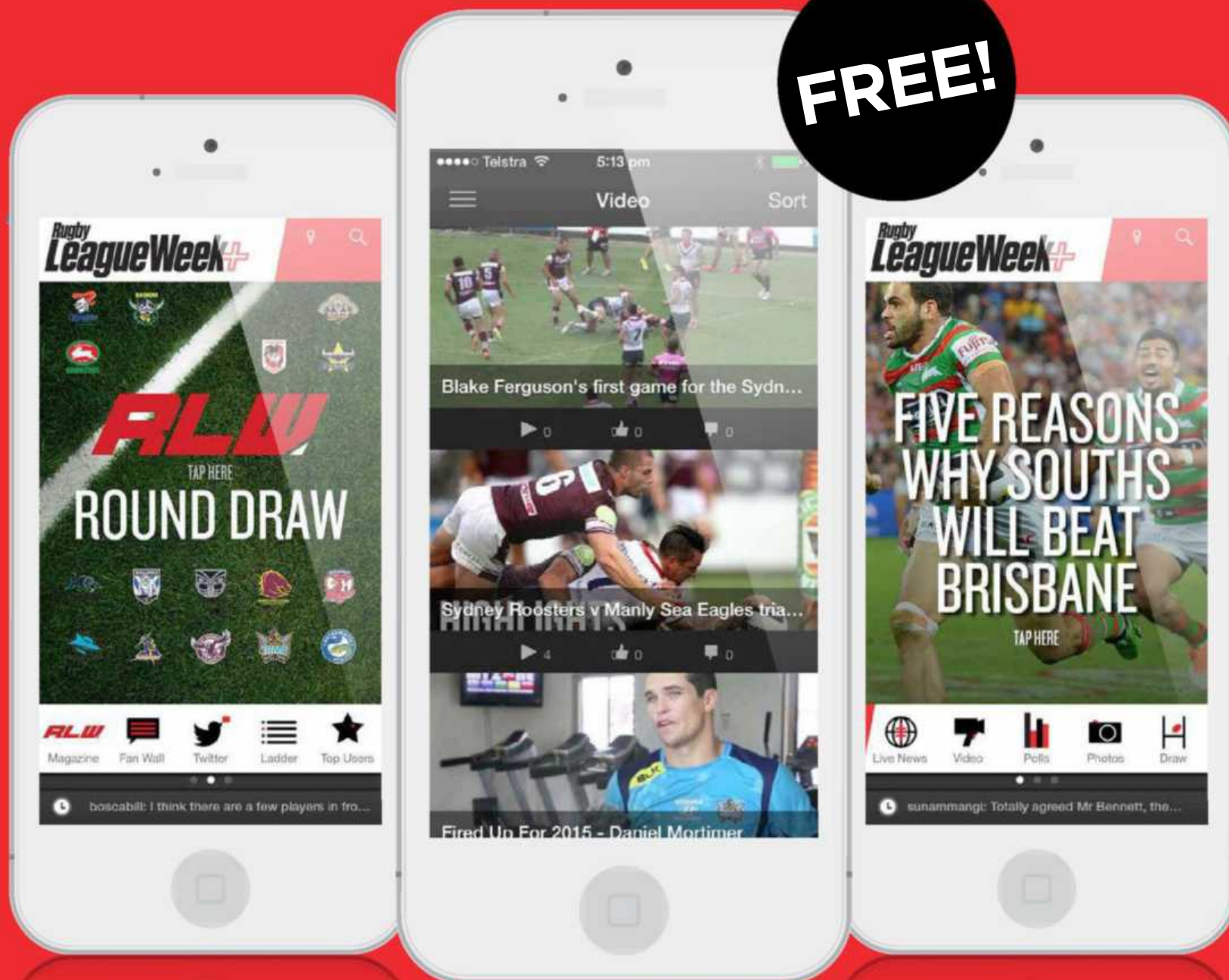
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